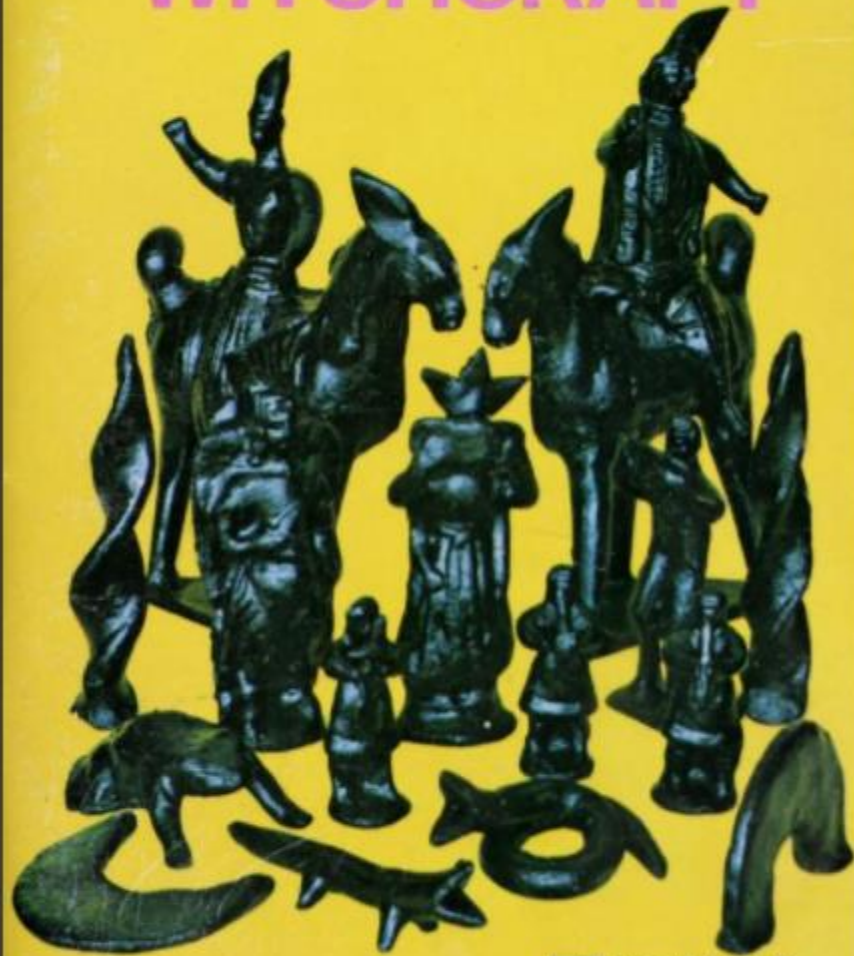


a guide to MEXICAN  
**WITCHCRAFT**



MINUTIAE  
MEXICANA



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# A GUIDE TO MEXICAN WITCHCRAFT

by  
WILLIAM AND CLAUDIA MADSEN



...he is a sorcerer (*nahualli*),  
possesses seeds  
and knows maleficent herbs,  
a witch doctor, he prophesies with cords.

*Florentine Codex*

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*There are many representations of Quetzalcoatl, a god ancient in Middle America before the Christian era began. We have adopted as the insignia of our series the most common — that of the feathered serpent. The father and creator of man, Quetzalcoatl was the beneficent god of life and the wind, the god of civilization who inspired man to study the stars, to develop agriculture, industry and the arts.*

Impreso y hecho en México



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COMMENTATOR: Dr. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán,

ART: Marianne Yampolsky

COVER: The pottery figures are part of a cuadrilla or group of 38 used by healers in the Valley of Toluca to cure aires. Clearly representing a mixture of native American and Christian concepts, among the 38 are animals commonly associated with witchcraft everywhere, toad, lizard, snake, a crescent moon; "towers" of wind and water; St. Gabriel; a Knight and his Lady. The figures, together with ceremonial food, are taken by the curandero to the spot where the patient supposedly contracted the ailment, and a cleansing rite is performed there, with or without the patient's attendance. Both food and figures are buried or hidden in the area. Figures may be of black clay as pictured or speckled yellow, dark green and hot pink against a white background. Photo Infot, S. A.





## The Burning Question

Among tourists in Mexico the burning question about witchcraft is: Does it work? The answer is yes, if you are a witch. Or, if you are bewitched. Or, if you know somebody who is bewitched. But if you are a foreigner, don't expect witchcraft to work for *you*. It is a well known fact that foreigners are immune to magic.

Witchcraft works wonders when it is made in Mexico by Mexicans. A mistreated wife can use it to knock off her husband or drive him insane. A jealous wife can eliminate her rivals by witchcraft. An abandoned wife can draw her philandering mate home again. The wife of a drunk can make him stop drinking.

It works for men, too. A jilted suitor can bewitch his fickle sweetheart and make her ugly so nobody will marry her. A storekeeper can hire a witch to put his competitors out of business. A farmer can acquire a coveted piece of land by bewitching others who want to buy it. A man who has been insulted can get even by using witchcraft to inflict his enemy with sickness, death, or financial failure.

Witchcraft has another function which outweighs all the rest today. It can cut people down to size when they start putting on the dog. The most likely candidate



for bewitchment is the big shot. If he tries to outdo his neighbors by throwing money around on fancy clothes or a big house, he had better beware. Conspicuous consumption is not the key to social success among most Mexicans.

You may be tempted to try to find a witch during your visit in Mexico. This is not easy. Mexicans think it best not to discuss witchcraft with tourists. If you bring up the subject with a Mexican, he will almost certainly assure you he does not believe in witchcraft. He may explain that witchcraft is a superstition found only among uncivilized Indians. Perhaps he will entertain you with amusing tales of witches who lived in his community long ago, before the advent of "civilization." Civilized people are not supposed to believe in witchcraft. "There are no more witches, here, now that we are civilized," the visitor is told.

But you begin to see a different picture if you live in a Mexican village long enough to make friends. One day a neighbor will take you into his confidence. "I don't believe in witchcraft, but . . .," he pauses to observe your reaction. If it appears favorable, he continues, "I have seen a case of witchcraft with my own eyes." He relates the gory details. From then on, you are "in." You hear about case after horrible case of bewitchment.

Still, nobody knows who the witches are. They must be from another town. Probably from one of those uncivilized Indian villages over the hill. It is dangerous to tell a foreigner that your neighbor is a witch, even when the whole town has him pegged for a witch. The foreigner might be a government spy sent to investigate witches. And the witch might find out who ratted on him.

We lived in "our village" for nearly a year before people would risk naming the witches in their own

community. Not one was a primitive Indian. They all turned out to be entirely civilized. Their names have been changed in the following pages, and so have the names of our other informants. We trust you will understand why.

## A CASE HISTORY OF WITCHCRAFT AND ATTEMPTED MURDER

One of our best informants on Mexican witchcraft was a man called Raúl. He lived near Mexico City, in the suburban town of Tepepan. Fear of witchcraft was rife there, and cures for bewitchment were in great demand. Raúl had achieved renown as a healer who could cure the bewitched.

He was a man in his forties who wore city clothes and mannerisms. Raúl spoke freely of his ambition to make money and get ahead. Partly because of his ambition, he was not well liked in the community.

A neighbor of ours introduced us to Raúl and persuaded him to tell us the story of his life as a *curandero*, or curer. Our first meeting took place at his home, on a scenic hilltop overlooking the green cornfields and adobe houses of the town below. It was a peaceful scene on that spring day in 1952. Certainly, it did not seem like a setting for the macabre crime that took place twelve years later.

Raúl and his son were arrested in connection with the attempted murder of a Tepepan witch in 1964. The son, Roberto, confessed he had stabbed the witch more than twenty times and left her for dead because she had bewitched his family. Raúl did not participate in the crime, but confirmed his son's accusations against the witch. They said she had afflicted them

with illness, crop failure and loss of business. Roberto's strange story was quoted in a Mexico City newspaper as follows:

"When this woman (the witch) learned that my father was dedicated to curing, she became angry and declared war on us. She did us all the harm she could, to the point where our fields no longer bore fruit in spite of the fact that we watered them, fertilized them, and worked on them continuously. Our chickens, dogs and pigs suffered from a very rare disease. She also did much harm to the adults in our family, for we were constantly sick.

"At night, this woman appeared in my dreams and told me she was going to send me to the Devil. When I woke up, my tongue felt like pork cracklings. I felt pain in my head. My legs were weak. Sometimes I dreamed she was killing me with an electric current. In other dreams, she transformed me into a butterfly or a bird and made me fly through the air. It was horrible.

"My father was also bewitched, and we could do nothing to save ourselves from this witch.

"For this reason, I decided to kill her. For many days, I thought about a way to kill her as the only means of gaining freedom from her. For this purpose, I went to her house and, when I was inside, I slashed her until she fell to the floor. Believing she was dead, I left to return to my home.

"Then we recovered. The animals, my father, everything changed for the better from that moment on. Now we are free from all her witchcraft.

"If she does not die, I will attack her again, until I kill her, because that is the only way to prevent her from continuing to do us harm."

When Roberto finished his statement to the police, Raúl added his own explanation:

"She (the witch) disliked me because I perform Aztec cleansings. That is to say, I remove all the afflictions sent by witches. I do this by passing eggs, pepper tree branches, lime, and other substances over the body of my patients. All this I studied and learned from the book of San Cipriano. It is a book of magic. I charge three or five pesos for each cleansing but, ever since this woman bewitched us, we have had no clients."

Both father and son cited the witch's survival as proof of her extraordinary power from the Devil. "It would not be possible for an ordinary person to survive the number of wounds I gave her," Roberto told the newspaper reporter.

The press predicted that a psychiatrist would be called in on the case, to make a study of the attacker and convince him that "witches do not exist and there is no such thing as witchcraft." There is only one thing wrong with this suggestion. To convince Roberto, the psychiatrist would have to convince a whole town that witches do not exist.

In the world of Tepepan, witches are real. Everybody in town knows who they are, and they know that everybody knows. They are alive. They eat, sleep and work just as other people do. Of course, they also do quite a few things which ordinary people do not do.

Witchcraft has been for real in Mexico since ancient times. Aztec civilization produced some interesting witch types, but they couldn't hold a candle to the witches of Spain. When put to the test, Moctezuma's witches failed to stop Cortés. As a result, the Spaniards conquered Mexico. Not until the conquerors brought Western civilization to Mexico did witchcraft begin to boom.

Let us turn back the pages of history to see who the witches were in the good old days.





## Witchcraft Before Cortés

Tezcatlipoca, patron of sorcerers, was also the creator god, with diverse attributes. "The mirror that smokes" represented the night sky, and it was he who discovered fire. The god of sin and suffering, he also looked after young warriors.

Not just anybody could be a witch in the ancient Aztec empire. Only those born under the sign of rain were destined by the gods to practice witchcraft. That was fate. Born to be a witch. No problem of identity.

The witches of Spain were more sophisticated. They chose their own fate. Some became witches just for the fun of it. By making a pact with the Devil, witches got rich quick and enjoyed all the pleasures of the flesh. Satan appeared in the form of a large he-goat and taught them black magic. Then the witches were marked with a symbol of the Devil, usually the foot of an animal.

Spaniards most commonly identified witches as women. Fray Martín de Castañega explained that this was so because "women are sinks of iniquity." Those most likely to become witches were women of low birth and bad reputation. Apparently, they had a craving for upward social mobility. Witchcraft improved their economic status and gave them an opportunity to associate with very important clients.

Most Aztec witches were men. Their hero was Tezcatlipoca, the god of night and patron of witches. His most famous feat was changing himself into a jaguar. In his animal form, he knocked a rival god out of the sky and gained temporary control of the universe. The



Witches on broomsticks arrived with the conquerors. Mexican witches flew with woven straw wings, first removing their legs and leaving them at home, arranged in the form of a cross. Since early in this century they have flown by transforming themselves into vultures.

man or god who possessed magical power to change into animal form was known as a *nagual*. This Aztec word has been translated as *brujo* in Spanish and "witch" in English.

Some witches moved in elite circles of Aztec society. They counseled kings and predicted future happenings, such as the coming of drought, sickness, and Spaniards. They were supposed to be able to stop such catastrophies but, in the end, they could not stop Cortés. Why? Well, for one thing, the Aztecs had not invented organized witchcraft.

European witchcraft was much more advanced. The witches of Spain were organized in large bands of 100 or more members, according to testimony recorded by the Spanish Inquisition. The membership reportedly included sexual perverts, prostitutes and procurers. Meetings of witch societies were devoted to black magic and sexual orgies.

Spanish witches also worked in family groups. It was not uncommon for entire families to be accused of practicing witchcraft. A dying witch could bind her children to Satan's service by leaving them the tools of her trade.

The complex organization of Spanish witchcraft constituted a grave threat to society. Witches were

treated like criminals by the church, the state, and the community. This was not the case in Aztec society, where witchcraft was unorganized and underdeveloped. The Aztecs did not burn witches. After all, they were just doing a job assigned to them by the gods.

Despite their lack of organization, Aztec witches had developed some of the magic powers associated with European witchcraft. They were credited with the power to fly, the power to change form, and the power to cause sickness or death. Moreover, these feats were accomplished without any help from Satan.

The Aztec witch caused sickness by sucking blood from his victim, capturing his soul, or inserting worms and pebbles into his body. The Spanish witch also had a taste for human blood, but preferred the more feminine technique of sticking pins in a doll made to resemble the victim. A jab in the leg crippled the enemy, and a thrust through the heart killed him. It was a very neat way to dispose of a person. No bloodstains.

Other Spanish techniques included hiding magic powders in the victim's food and giving him the evil eye. Evil eye sickness could be caused by a witch, or by a mere mortal who possessed powerful eyes. The mortal inflicted this illness unintentionally, just by looking at someone he admired or envied. But the witch caused evil eye sickness on purpose. He could do it by long distance magic, without setting eyes on the victim. A Spanish priest explained that the power of the evil eye was the result of foul thoughts and evil designs which shone through the eyes.

We have seen how simple Aztec witchcraft was before the Spanish Conquest. Now let us look at the remarkable changes that took place after contact with Western civilization.



### The Devil's Conquest

The big boom in Mexican witchcraft began with the arrival of the Devil. He came to Mexico with the first Spanish priests. Satan was the target of the Spanish war against paganism, even though the Mexican pagans had never heard of him. They learned quickly. They had to.

Spanish priests taught the Indians that the universe was divided into forces of good, headed by God, and forces of evil, headed by Satan. Pagan deities were described as demons working for the Devil. Native witches were assumed to be allies of Satan and enemies of Christianity. So were all Mexicans who continued to practice Indian religious rites.

The upshot of Christian indoctrination was a rapid expansion of witchcraft. As Elsie Clews Parsons, the anthropologist, observed:

"The *padres* encouraged witchcraft beliefs by stigmatizing as witchcraft what they disapproved of. The unbaptized become witches; all who practice non-Christian rites are wizards. Witchcraft was the nearest approach to the Catholic conception of sin that was made by the Indians and the *padres* took advantage of it."



The Christian dichotomy between the forces of good and evil was completely foreign to Aztec religion. Mexicans saw both good and evil in every man and god. For example, Tezcatlipoca bestowed prosperity and prestige in his role as god of providence. But as god of misery and patron of witches, he caused anguish, discord and evil. No god or man was perfect. The existence of evil was a part of life that had to be accepted.

The Indians must have been amazed when Spanish priests set out to eliminate evil in Mexico. To achieve this goal, the Spaniards established the Holy Office of the Inquisition in New Spain. Its modest purpose was to combat witchcraft, superstitious curing, idolatry and immorality.

Punishment for convicted witches included whipping, imprisonment, public ridicule and official reprimands. Most of the defendants were mestizos of Spanish-Indian descent, and Negroes. Pure Indians were supposed to be exempt from the Inquisition, on the grounds that they belonged to a lower order of humanity incapable of fully understanding Christianity. Cases of Indian witchcraft were handled by parish priests.

Witchcraft charges were not limited to individuals whom the Mexicans identified as witches. The Spaniards also suspected native curers of practicing witchcraft. Spanish priests classified Mexican curers as good or bad, depending upon their healing techniques. Good curers were those who adopted Spanish medical practices and called on Catholic saints for help. Bad curers practiced Aztec medicine with the assistance of pagan deities. The bad ones, of course, turned out to be witches.

Friar Bernardino de Sahagún defined the Spanish distinction between a good native curer and a bad one.

The good curer knew how to bleed, purge, set bones, soften lumps by massage, give herb medicines, and cure the evil eye. The bad curer used false and superstitious techniques, such as sucking worms or pebbles out of the patient's body. He also practiced sorcery and had a pact with the Devil, according to Sahagún.

The *padres* introduced Christian faith healing to replace superstitious pagan curing. Bones and garments of famous Christian saints were recommended for their healing power. The Mexicans learned how to rub these relics over a patient's body so as to draw out the disease. An unbroken egg could be used in the same way to cleanse a patient suffering from the evil eye. Cleansings performed with a black chicken were supposed to cure bewitchment.

The Spanish distinction between witchcraft and curing was not easy to prove during the days of the Inquisition. Those accused of witchcraft frequently claimed to be curers. One defendant tried to prove he was not a witch by testifying that he called on St. Anthony and the Virgin of Guadalupe to help him cure. His defense was rejected. The Inquisitors decided he was just mouthing Christian prayers to provide a cover story for his evil deeds.

The impact of Christianity on Mexican witchcraft differed in the city and the country. The least change took place in the small Indian villages of rural Mexico. Here, the practice of witchcraft was carried on by the old-fashioned *nagual*—a man who could turn into an animal. With the acceptance of Christianity, the Indians came to view the *nagual* as an enemy of religion and society. He was relegated to the lowest status in the community. Still, the natives had difficulty imagining a *nagual* witch who would sink so low as to make a deal with the Christian Devil. One old Indian told the Inquisitors he did not believe a man became a witch by

making a pact with Satan. "Witches are born to be witches," he insisted, "and it is God who makes them that way."

The Devil was much more successful in the cities and towns of Mexico. He made most of his conquests among mestizos and mulattos. Near the city of Mérida, in Yucatán, the Devil gave witch parties that were the talk of the town in colonial times. Witches from miles around gathered in a field to sing, dance, and kiss the Devil's bottom. This was no mean feat since the Devil appeared at these parties in the form of a goat. Each witch made a pact with the Devil by giving him a finger from her left hand. In return, he placed his mark on the witch's eye or nose. Male witches commonly painted pictures of the Devil on their backs.

Big cities became centers of sin and sex magic when Mexicans responded to the shock of conquest with mass drunkenness and vagabondage. Men deserted their families and wandered aimlessly from town to town. They used European magic to attract females, while abandoned wives worked magic to bring home the philanderers.

An Inquisition report tells how Luisa de Cuillar got her wandering husband back by hiring a *curandera* to tie knots in the drawstring of his underpants. Ten days later he came home. He said he had been offered three women, but was unable to have sexual relations with any of them. Then he knew he had been hexed. Luisa was afraid he would try to get even with her, so she asked the *curandera* to "untie" her husband. He left her as soon as the knots were undone.

The details of many similar cases were solemnly recorded by the Spanish Inquisition. These records have been made available to scholars and laymen through the archival works of a distinguished Mexican anthropologist, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán.



## Indian Witchcraft Today

Witchcraft is a serious concern among the Indians of modern Mexico, but it seldom strikes willy-nilly, without rhyme or reason. Fear of bewitchment is limited to those who break the rules of good conduct. The three commandments enforced by Indian witchcraft are well defined by William Holland, who studied the Tzotzil Indians in Chiapas:

"He who hopes to be safe from witchcraft must not permit himself excessive wealth, must respect the rights and properties of his neighbors, must not alter or deny in any manner his Indian heritage by failing to participate fully in the traditions and spirit of Tzotzil life."

The kind of behavior that becomes an invitation to witchcraft is described by Oscar Lewis:

"Fear of sorcery . . . occurs only when a person has reason to expect it as the result of having injured or insulted another or of having become wealthy or otherwise outstanding."

Lewis was writing about Tepoztlán, a town in Morelos whose culture has changed so rapidly that it is



no longer Indian. Nevertheless, Tepoztlan has maintained much of its Spanish-Indian heritage in the supernatural zone.

Across the mountains from Tepoztlan lies the Nahuatl Indian village of San Francisco Tecospa studied by the authors. It is located in the southern part of the Valley of Mexico where the Aztecs once ruled. Witchcraft is a very real danger in the world of Tecospa, but it is one that most villagers have learned to avoid by a few, simple precautions. Courteous and inconspicuous behavior provides the best safeguard against bewitchment.

You may wonder how an Indian knows he has been bewitched. He may not know until he has been sick for a long time, because bewitchment cannot be diagnosed by any specific symptoms. Suspicion of witchcraft arises only after he has tried the usual remedies for natural illness. As a last resort, he may try modern medicine. If a city doctor can't cure him then the Indian can be pretty sure he has been bewitched. At this point, he doesn't have to waste any time wondering who did it. He knows who did it because there is only one witch family in Tecospa. It would be unthinkable to accuse anybody outside the Martínez family of practicing witchcraft.

Now we would like to introduce the *nagual* witch of Tecospa. Don Mario Martínez is a tall, white-haired old man of striking appearance. A huge, bulbous nose dominates the center of his face, which is grooved with deep wrinkles. One eye peers straight ahead while the other glances off to the right. He wears white, pajama style trousers and a blousy white shirt covered by a handsome handwoven jacket. Leather sandals and a sombrero complete the outfit.

Everybody in the village identifies Don Mario as a witch. He is called a *brujo* in Spanish and a *nagual* in Nahuatl. The people of Central Mexico recognize

two types of *naguales*—the *nagual* witch and the *nagual* thief. Both have the power to change into animal form, but there the resemblance ends. The *nagual* thief is a relatively harmless fellow who uses his animal disguise to steal fruit or some other kind of food. He does not injure people. That is the business of the *nagual* witch.

Don Mario and three of his children were destined at birth to become witches. His son, Guillermo, was born with a hole in his tongue. This was a sign of his fate. The birth of a witch is always indicated by some such sign.

Don Mario denies he is a witch, but witches always do. To admit to being a witch would be like admitting you are a murderer. The old man says he is a *curandero* and his curing power comes from God. Nobody in the village believes his story.

"People say I am a witch, but I am not," he told us. "My power comes from above, and it is a power to help raise up my brothers."

The villagers dislike Don Mario not only because he is a witch, but also because he is an outsider. Outsiders are not to be trusted. Although Don Mario came to Tecospa from Toluca nearly 50 years ago, he has never been accepted as a full-fledged member of the community. He began curing shortly after arriving in Tecospa, but soon lost his local patients because they feared he might bewitch them. Neighbors say his out-of-town patients are all bewitched. Don Mario disclaims the ability to treat bewitchment because it is believed that only a witch can cure this disease.

Tecospan says Don Mario turns into a burro at night before he goes witching. He accomplishes this transformation by rolling in ashes or leaping over a fire twice to make the sign of the cross.

Our study of the witch's career led us to the case of Don Fernando and the pin-headed doll. The victim,

Don Fernando, was considered somewhat deviant because he had violated the egalitarian values of Indian culture. He was relatively well-to-do and owned a better-than-average home. He also prided himself on belonging to an important family, since one of his relatives had become a Catholic bishop.

Don Fernando told us he thought Don Mario bewitched him because they had a dispute over the ownership of a piece of land. Shortly after this incident, Don Fernando began suffering with severe headaches. Not knowing the cause of the headaches, he consulted a city doctor who failed to cure him. Next, he went to the local *curandero*, who told Don Fernando his sickness did not come from natural causes and could not be treated with Indian medicine. The *curandero* advised him to go to Mexico City for consultation with a Spiritist curer who specialized in the treatment of bewitchment.

The Spiritist diagnosed his illness as bewitchment, and told Don Fernando exactly where he could find the doll used to bewitch him. It would be in a ravine near Don Fernando's house. At the exact spot indicated, Don Fernando found a doll with 99 pins stuck in its head. He removed the pins and burned the doll, according to the instructions he had received from the Spiritist. As soon as he finished doing this, the headaches ceased. Although the Spiritist had not revealed the name of the witch, Don Fernando had no doubt about his identity. Whenever a case of bewitchment is discovered, suspicion falls on Don Mario or his sons.

The next bewitchment we discovered was the case of the old maid and the rag doll. During the latter part of our field work in Tecospa, Cecilia Robles was horrified to find that someone had cut a large, semicircular piece of cloth from one of her dresses during a family

fiesta held in celebration of her father's saint's day. Her eyes began to itch so much that she started scratching the skin around them and could not stop. She decided that a rejected suitor had hired the witch's son, Guillermo, to bewitch her out of spite because he felt insulted when she turned him down. She thought the jilted boy friend intended to make her disfigure her face so nobody else would want to marry her. The witch's son was suspected of cutting the piece of cloth from her dress in order to make a rag doll used for the hex. Cecilia became an uncourted old maid at the age of 25. Villagers associated her numerous illnesses with her reputation as a loose woman.

Victim of a third case of witchcraft was the witch's own grandson. He was an innocent victim of a quarrel between his mother and the witch. The mother, Concha, was the only one of Don Mario's children who was not born with the fate of becoming a witch. Don Mario quarreled with her when he demanded that she return a piece of land he had given her. When she refused he tried to bewitch her, but failed because she is *yolchichic*. A *yolchichic* person is immune to witchcraft by virtue of having been born with bitter blood and a strong heart.

Failing to harm Concha, Don Mario sought revenge by bewitching her son Ciro. The boy suffered pains in his legs and abdomen. An appendicitis operation brought him no relief. He was reported to be drying up and losing weight when we left Mexico. Concha warned her father that she would kill him if Ciro died. Fear of this threat was expected to cause Don Mario to lift the bewitchment spell.

Don Mario possesses the power of the evil eye, which he uses deliberately to harm little children. He can make a child sick just by looking at him. The child vomits, cries all night and has diarrhea. Sometimes, he



has chills and fever and vomits white worms. If the witch gives a very strong look, the child's liver will burst, causing death. When a child dies of evil eye sickness, one eye sinks deep into the socket.

When a Nahuatl Indian thinks he is bewitched, he doesn't just sit home quaking in his huaraches. He tries to act brave and scare the witch. He might threaten to kill Don Mario as Concha did. Or he might beat up the witch just enough to give him an idea of what he had coming if he didn't take the whammy off.

Plots to kill the witch are seldom carried out, because of the old saying that whoever kills a witch assumes all his sins. This means the murderer would be doomed to hell for eternity. It is considered more prudent to let God punish the witch for his sins. Since Don Mario is the biggest sinner in the village, it is certain that he will pay for his sins in hell.

Although the *nagual* witch is feared and disliked, he is allowed to participate in all village activities. Don Mario attends religious fiestas and works on community labor projects. People greet him on the street, but seldom stop to chat. Close relationships with a witch are avoided because they might lead to trouble.

The last of the local vampire witches died nearly 25 years ago, but the villagers are still plagued by an out-of-town vampire who flies to Tecospa to suck blood. He lives in the nearby Indian village of San Agustín Ohtenco. Tecospans use the Nahuatl word *tlacique* to designate the vampire. Like the *nagual*, he is destined from birth to develop evil supernatural powers without any training. Since a vampire cannot eat meat, he must feed on human blood. Before sucking blood, he transforms himself into a vulture and flies away into the night, carrying a pot of fire to light his way.

To avoid detection, the vampire puts his victims into a deep sleep during the sucking process. Although he

sucks in his animal form, the vampire leaves human teeth marks on his victims. Two residents of Tecospa reported finding vampire teeth marks on their throats while we were working there. Such incidents may occur more often now, because the Ohtenco vampire married a Tecospa girl just before we left the village. It is to be assumed the bride did not know her husband was a vampire.

The Zapotec Indians of Mitla, in the state of Oaxaca, believe a witch can take the form of a vulture, black burro, dog or cat. Like the Nahuatl *nagual*, a Zapotec witch changes into an animal by rolling in an ash heap. Unlike the Nahuatl Indians, Zapotecs think that most witches are women. The vampire witch usually sucks blood from infants at night, while their parents are asleep. When they awaken in the morning, they find the baby vomiting blood. Protection against this danger may be provided by tying to the infant's belt a small bag containing mustard seeds, rosemary, a pin, and the picture of a saint. If the witch animal can be caught and beaten at the scene of the crime, she may die the next day, after reverting to her human form.

The Zapotec witch has the power to injure a person without going near him. By some magical means unknown to anthropologists, the witch penetrates her victim's flesh with thorns, feathers, glass, stones, earth or bones. Witch-sent objects are called *chizos*, and the witch who sends them is known as an *hechicera*. The Zapotec *curandera* treats this type of bewitchment by sucking the *chizo* out of the patient's body. Among the Nahuatl Indians, witch-sent objects are removed by administering a purge which causes the victim to vomit worms, pebbles or hair.

Recently, Tecospans have discovered that city surgeons can perform operations to remove small stones

from the stomach of a bewitched person. If the witch merely intended to punish his victim, the patient recovers as soon as the *chizo* is removed. But if the witch sent the *chizo* to kill, he will die whether the object is removed or not.

In her study of Mitla, Parsons stresses the absence of witch-baiting. Accusations of witchcraft are never made against members of the community. When witches are identified, they always come from another town. Mitla residents named witches who also practiced curing in San Blas, near Tehuantepec, and Salina Cruz. The witch doctor of San Blas performs his hexes for purely commercial reasons. He sends a witch object into you so you will pay him to suck it out. Nothing personal, you understand. Even the witch doctor is allowed to go about his business without any interference.

Witchcraft is not considered a major cause of illness among the Mixtec Indians of Juxtlahuaca in the state of Oaxaca. These Indians sometimes hire a witch outside of their own community, but do not identify fellow residents as witches. Kimball and Romaine Romney report an unusual variety of image magic described by their informants in Juxtlahuaca. A clay or wax image of the victim is made with a hole in the stomach, where the witch inserts the stub of a candle previously used at a wake. The witch then sticks cactus thorns in the image and buries it near the victim's house.

The Tzotzil Indians believe witches receive their power from Pukuj, who is the Maya god of death. When Pukuj seduces sleeping Tzotzil women, their children are born to be witches. Sometimes he inserts drops of his own blood into the veins of children selected at birth for a career in witchcraft. When they reach puberty, such children start casting spells that kill trees and animals.

Grown-up witches can turn into animals, whirlwinds, rainbows, comets, and incandescent red balls. A vulture, an owl, or a butterfly may be a witch in disguise. To accomplish his evil ends, the witch must make offerings of incense to pagan deities and request their permission to fly through the air in animal form.

Only witches can transform themselves into animals, but every Tzotzil Indian has an animal companion. The destinies of the Indian and his animal companion are inseparably linked, so the Indian suffers injury when his animal companion is hurt. A witch can inflict illness on his enemy by injuring the enemy's animal companion. When the animal is wounded, his human counterpart suffers soul loss and falls ill. The soul leaves his body perhaps never to return. Unless he can recover his soul, the sick man will die.

The Tzotzil witch also knows how to make his enemy sick by sending an animal into his stomach. This causes a tumor. A pain in the stomach is no joke for the Indian. If he could see inside himself he might find snakes, frogs, toads, worms, lizards, rats, dogs or armadillos. Witches are even accused of substituting an animal for the human fetus carried by a pregnant woman. This is the most common explanation for a miscarriage in the early months of pregnancy.

Like the Aztecs, the Tzotzil Indians identify the witch as a poor man who lacks sufficient land, animals, and crops for sustenance. Consequently, he has the best reason to envy people who have more worldly possessions. Holland notes that the threat of witchcraft prevents the accumulation of wealth and the introduction of mestizo ways. A Tzotzil Indian who dared to wear city clothes and ride horseback would be bound to end up with an animal in his stomach. Very few Indians are that foolhardy.



# The Healing Art



Popular use of the term "witch doctor" fosters the notion that the Indian *curandero* is identified as some kind of witch. This is not necessarily so. *Curanderos* may be highly respected individuals who treat evil air, ghost fright, and other diseases unrelated to witchcraft. The upstanding *curandero* is a pillar of the Indian community, and his dedication to curing is unquestioned. Unfortunately, the reputation of the entire curing profession has been tarnished by double agents who bewitch the very same people they cure.

The *curandero* of Tecospa has never been accused of practicing witchcraft. Don Eusebio is famous throughout the Milpa Alta area for his skillful treatment of evil air sickness sent by the diminutive deities who produced rain for the ancient Aztecs. Pagan rain dwarfs look and act like little Indians. They are called *yeyecatl* in Nahuatl, and *aires* in Spanish. Since they live in hillside caves, the sickness they send is known as cave air. You get sick when the rain dwarfs blow their breath on you. This they do if you doubt their supernatural powers, trespass near their caves, or carry food near them without giving them any. Cave air is one of the few diseases that can be diagnosed by specific symptoms. It causes gout, paralysis, tendon contraction, red skin pustules, rheumatism and chills.

Don Eusebio was destined from birth to become a *curandero*. He received his curing power from rain dwarfs, who came to him one night during a storm.

Lightning struck his house and knocked all the inhabitants unconscious; however, everybody except Don Eusebio recovered quickly. As he lost consciousness, the rain dwarfs kidnapped his spirit. When his body hit the floor his limbs became rigid and his teeth started grinding. Soon he went limp, as though he were dead.

The dwarfs forced his spirit to accompany them to their caves, where he saw many little people and a great variety of crops. The little people told him they would not let his spirit return to his body until he agreed to become a *curandero*. He refused, but they beat him until he gave in. Then the dwarfs presented him with a wooden staff, three curing stones, and a spirit wife.

His spirit wife lives in a cave with other rain dwarfs. She is invisible to everybody except Don Eusebio and the dwarfs. If he had refused to marry her she would have killed him. The children of this marriage live in the cave with their mother. Don Eusebio has not been allowed to have sexual relations with his human wife since he became a *curandero*. When he tried to sleep with her one night, he had an attack and fell on the floor. The rain dwarfs gave his spirit a severe beating, so now he concentrates all his sexual activity on his spirit wife. The marriage of a *curandero* and a rain dwarf lasts for eternity.

The dwarfs help Don Eusebio remove cave air from a patient's body and tell him which curing stone to use.

He begins a cleansing treatment by rubbing the sick person with an unbroken egg, which absorbs some of the disease. To confirm the diagnosis, he breaks the egg and pours it in a glass of water. The presence of cave air is indicated if the egg white rises in the shape of a whirlpool and little bubbles form on the surface of the water. Next, Don Eusebio removes the cave air by sucking the patient's body through a hole in his doughnut-shaped curing stone. Sometimes the rain dwarfs instruct him to brush the sick person with a handful of curative herbs, twigs, and flowers. Rosemary, pepper-tree twigs, and red geraniums are usually preferred. Don Eusebio charges only one peso per treatment. It is clear that he is not in the curing business for mercenary reasons.

If a sick person shows no improvement after three or four cleansings, the angry rain dwarfs must be placated with a food offering. The dwarfs tell the *curandero* what kind of a meal they want. It may consist of tiny tortillas, tamales, soup, rice, and *mole verde* served with a small glass of pulque. This offering is called a *tlacahuili*, and it has been used in curing cave air since the days of the ancient Aztecs.

The patient completes his cure by taking a sweat bath in an Aztec *temazcal*. Any cave air remaining in his body after the cleansings leaves through his sweat during the *temazcal* bath. Cave air is the most common sickness in Tecospa.

Don Eusebio cures another kind of evil air sickness, caused by an encounter with a ghost. Ghosts of men who died by violence roam the earth and frighten the living. They send the disease called *aire de noche* (night air) or *espanto* (fright), in Spanish. Ghost fright makes the victim shake with chills and jump at the slightest noise. Sometimes, it produces loss of consciousness and temporary muteness.

The *curandero* treats ghost fright by rubbing his patient with a live, black chicken. The sickness absorbed by the chicken may kill or cripple it. A crippled chicken can be cured if it is smoked over a brazier fire made with charcoal, blessed palm leaves, blessed bay leaves, incense, and a handful of dirt from a crossroad. A similar treatment for human victims of ghost fright must be followed by confession, communion and a priestly blessing.

Whores, or women who are merely promiscuous, release a third kind of disease-bearing air called *yeyecatlcihuatl* (woman air), in Nahuatl, and *aire de basura* (garbage air) in Spanish. Garbage air harms newborn babies and fetuses. The fetus will be born blind. When a loose woman enters the house of a newborn infant, its eyes will be covered with pus. Garbage air sickness can be cured by washing the eyes in water boiled with the umbilical cord of a first-born child.

Doña Aurelia, the female *curandera* of Tecospa, specializes in treating evil eye sickness, which is called *mal de ojo*, or just *ojo*. This disease may be caused deliberately by a witch, or unintentionally by an individual who is born with very strong vision. Don Oliverio is the only person, outside of the witch's family, who possesses the power of the evil eye. Simply by looking at a child with longing, Don Oliverio puts something evil in its heart. Even though he does not mean to make the child sick, parents still feel bitter toward the man with the evil eye. Symptoms of the illness are fever, crying, diarrhea, loss of weight.

(Continued on p. 37)

Understandably, actual photographs of witchcraft rites are difficult to come by, this not being an activity on which publicity is regarded as a boon. Those on the following pages were taken by the authors during their sojourn in the vicinity of Xochimilco, D.F.





*This man is reputed to have been a very powerful witch, but he and his family emphatically deny the accusations of their neighbors. He says his supernatural power, which is draining away with old age, has been used only for curing, never for harming, people. Here, he stands beside his temazcal, no longer used for curative sweat baths, but preserved as a memento of the old days.*



*Above, the mestizo witch doctor demonstrates an herb cleansing for evil air sickness. When the evil air produces pustules, he cleanses the patient by licking his body; the power in his saliva effects the cure. Below, he performs an egg cleansing. He also knows how to cure fright.*



*A mestiza curandera poses with her calf in the courtyard of her home near Xochimilco. She specializes in the treatment of disease caused by fright and evil air. To protect her reputation as a dedicated curer, she refuses to treat cases of witchcraft; anybody who can cure bewitchment is suspected of knowing how to cause it, too.*



*A cow and two puppies watch the curandera perform the cleansing rite known as a limpia. She begins by rubbing her patient with an unbroken egg, which will absorb some of the illness and enable her to make a diagnosis when the egg is broken into a glass of water.*



*Next, the curandera performs a cleansing with a bunch of pepper tree branches, rue, and flowers. The contents of the egg used in the first cleansing have been poured into a glass of water where they formed a pattern indicating the presence of evil air, known as aire.*



*Blowing cigarette smoke on the patient prevents the escaping aire from infecting other people and animals present during the cleansing ceremony.*



*Here, the curandera examines a bowl of water and flowers that would have been used if the illness had been caused by fright. The flowers are thrown into the bowl of water at noon, when the healer shouts the patient's name three times in order to call back his lost soul. The soul escapes from the body at the time of a fright and wanders in space until this curing rite is performed.*

(Continued from p. 29)

Throughout Mexico, evil eye is regarded as a leading cause of childhood disease. Arthur Rubel and Richard Adams observe that any strong person can cause *ojo* by touching, fondling, or even being close to a child. The source of *ojo* may be a witch, an envious person, or a stranger.

Among the Tarascan Indians of Michoacán, evil eye is thought to be the only cause of children's illness. Tarascans do not like strangers to caress their children for fear of the evil eye. Any illness that befalls a child after an encounter with a stranger is diagnosed as the result of evil eye.

The Mixtec Indians of Oaxaca believe that evil eye is caused by a person who looks at a baby with admiration or envy, but without conscious intent to harm. Constant crying, sore eyes, and generalized sickness are attributed to the evil eye. A mother may ask the person who caused the illness to help cure it by rubbing some of his saliva on the baby's eyes and cheeks.

Cornelia Mak describes the egg treatment used by the Mixtecs to treat *ojo*. A hen's egg is rubbed over the baby's eyes and then broken into a saucer, where it is pierced with seven sharp thorns. The pierced egg represents the eyes of the guilty person, who may go blind when the baby recovers.

The Zapotec Indians of Mitla, Oaxaca, told Charles Leslie that evil eye sickness resulted when a child's soul was dislodged from his body by the stare of strange people or animals. Parsons observes that the Zapotecs usually regard the evil eye as a form of witchcraft. The Zapotec *curandera* treats this disease by first massaging the child with an infusion made from leaves of rue and pepper tree. Then he spurts a mouthful of *aguardiente* over the infant and sucks its body until the illness has been extracted.



Maya Indians of Yucatán believe that *ojo* is unwittingly caused by individuals born with the unfortunate power of producing sickness by merely looking at a child. It is assumed that such a person will be glad to participate in the cure by lending an article of his clothing, or something else of his, required for the ritual cleansing.

The image of the evil eye is more or less the same all over Mexico, but theories of evil air sickness vary greatly. This disease is universally known as *aire* or *aigre*, which may refer to a cold draft of air or a supernatural being.

Redfield stresses the fundamental importance of evil air concepts in the disease theories of Yucatán. Maya Indians think of winds as malevolent supernatural beings associated with wells, caves, and water generally. Whirling winds are particularly dangerous. When these winds enter the body of a human being, they cause sickness. People who go into the bush are in special danger from the winds. So are those who become overheated, tired, or sexually excited.

*Curanderos* or shaman-priests are required for all serious ailments resulting from attack by evil winds. Treatment consists of entreating or compelling the winds to leave the body of the patient. Sometimes, the zipche plant is used to sweep away the winds.

The Mixtec Indians of Juxtlahuaca, Oaxaca, believe that evil air emanates from corpses and phantoms. When an Indian encounters a dark shape in the night, he suffers a fright which causes fainting and dizziness. A female shape called a *tabayuku* appears only to men. She takes the victim to her cave, where she offers him anything he wants in return for a kiss. After kissing her, the man returns home half crazed. Unless he obtains the services of a *curandero*, he will die.

*Aire* is a common but relatively minor ailment among the Tzotzil and Zapotec Indians. The Zapotecs of Mitla think of *aire* as a gust of wind that hits and enters the body of an overheated person when he goes outside. Or air may hit a person whose head becomes hot from too much thinking. That is why people who think too much suffer from headaches. Sharp pain anywhere in the body may be diagnosed as the result of *aire*. A Zapotec *curandera* treats *aire* by massaging the patient with mountain lion grease. The Tzotzil curer beats the bare body of his patient with nettles.

Soul loss is the leading cause of Tzotzil illness. Witches or pagan deities can steal a man's soul by capturing his companion animal. When the animal is tortured, the man suffers. Supernatural guardians of springs, caves, and mountains may capture a man's companion animal because the man has offended them, or because a witch has invoked their aid in harming an enemy. Only a *curandero* can tell whether the soul loss was a result of witchcraft, or divine punishment for the sick man's misdeeds.

The Tzotzil curer divines the nature and source of the illness by taking his patient's pulse beat. A weak and irregular pulse beat indicates that a misfortune has befallen the patient's animal companion. Every kind of illness is associated with a distinctive pulse beat known only to the curer. Since most illnesses are viewed as punishment for misbehavior, the diagnosis also requires an analysis of the patient's recent behavior. Has he fallen down and offended a supernatural being in the ground? Has he had any quarrels? Has he made any enemies? The curer must persuade the patient to tell him all the mistakes he has made which could possibly account for punitive illness.

In an elaborate ceremony, the curer sacrifices a chicken and offers its spirit to Maya deities, in ex-

change for liberating the animal companion of the patient. The sacrificial animal must be a black chicken of the same sex as the patient. After the sacrifice, the curer calls the lost soul by blowing through a hollow gourd. The sick man recovers as soon as his soul returns to his body.

Mixtec Indians believe that sickness results when a man's soul is snatched by an angry supernatural being. This happens when the man stumbles or falls, thereby beating and offending a spirit in the ground or stones. It is not clear whether soul loss results from kidnapping of the patient's companion animal. Like the Tzotzils, the Mixtecs believe that everyone has a companion animal whose misfortunes affect the health of his human counterpart.

The symptoms of soul loss illness are extremely vague. Any serious or prolonged illness accompanied by high fever may be attributed to soul loss. The Mixtec *curandero* treats this disease by making offerings of pulque, copal incense, and food to offended supernatural beings, who may include Catholic saints. Mak reports that in San Miguel el Grande, a baby chick is buried at the spot where the patient lost his soul.

The Zapotecs attribute soul loss illness to a natural fright which jars the soul out of the body and causes it to go astray or get lost. There is no belief that an animal companion is involved, or that the soul has been captured by a supernatural being. The sickness is caused by fright at seeing a snake, a mad dog, a charging bull or any other terrifying sight, except for apparitions. Parsons makes no mention of soul loss illness produced by fright from encountering a ghost.

Soul loss caused by a frightening experience is associated with specific symptoms among the Zapotecs. These symptoms include sleeplessness, bad dreams, apathy, feebleness, and loss of appetite. Rarely do the

symptoms develop immediately. They may occur anywhere from a month to a year after the encounter.

A *curandera* divines the cause of the fright by burning copal, on which appears a picture of the animal or human who caused the fright. The *curandera* and her patient go to the spot where the soul was lost to make an offering of copal, food, and a chicken which is killed on the spot. Parsons writes that the Zapotecs do not know to whom these offerings are made. On the way home, the *curandera* beats on the ground with a stick and calls out to the stray soul, ordering it to come back. In the home of the patient, the *curandera* continues calling the soul at each of the four corners of the house. To each corner she carries a small water jar, calling into it: "Come to your house! Come! Don't go anywhere else! Come directly to your house!" Then she completes the cure by sucking the patient's arms and giving him a dose of herb medicine.

Parsons observes the similarity between the Zapotec theory of soul loss illness and the ancient Aztec concept of a lost *tonal*. The Aztecs used this term to designate a person's soul, which was associated with the god of the day of his birth. The *tonal* could get lost, causing sickness. The illness was treated by an Aztec shaman, who performed a ceremony known as the restitution of the *tonal*, which included an offering of tobacco.

All Mexican Indians know that illness can be caused by emotional disturbances, such as fear or anger. This discovery was made centuries before the advent of modern psychiatry. One of the most widespread illnesses in Mexico is *bilis*, an overflowing of bile produced by pent-up anger. In Tecospa, a man usually purges himself of the excess bile by fighting his enemy or beating his wife, but since women have no way to give vent to their anger they are more likely to suffer from *muina*, which is anger that has been bottled up. Anger



produces minor ailments, such as stomach-aches, that can be cured with herbal remedies.

Illness can also be caused by God and the Catholic saints in all parts of Mexico. God sends epidemics to punish entire communities for failure to fulfill religious obligations. A man who breaks his vow to a saint is certain to be afflicted with sickness. In most of Indian Mexico, saintly punishment is more of a threat than an actual cause of illness, perhaps because Indians diligently carry out their duties to the saints. An exception to this general rule is found in Chiapas, where witches work with God and the saints to cause illness. In Cancun, a witch obtains the permission of San Juan (St. John) to make a person lose his soul or send *aires* to make him ill. To cure soul loss caused by a witch, the *curandero* must find out from San Juan where the captured soul is hidden.

It should come as no surprise to learn that the Indian *curanderos* of Chiapas are suspected of being double agents. The witch and the curer acquire their supernatural powers in suspiciously similar ways, suggesting that anyone who can cure sickness could also cause it if he took a notion to do so.

The Tzotzil Indian who is about to become a *curandero* has a dream in which the ancestral gods of his sacred mountain take his animal companion to their abode to show him the curing rites. They give demonstrations of pulse taking, incense offerings, chicken and herb treatments. Then the gods set a trap for their hapless visitor. He is ordered to walk through an adjoining room, without stopping, and return to them. In the next room, he finds evil ancestral gods sitting around a table laden with bottles of mezcal. The evil ones invite him to sit down and have a drink. If he succumbs to temptation, he must learn how to cause sickness as well as cure it.

The sequence of photographs appearing on this and following pages was taken by anthropologist Irmgard Johnson in the town of Pisaflores, Veracruz, the same area described by Roberto Williams Garcia in Los Tepehuas.



These Tepehuas (an Indian group living in a mountainous area of Veracruz, Puebla and Hidalgo) were photographed during a curing ceremony called *el costumbre*. As devout Catholics, the Tepehuas have adapted Christianity to the ancient beliefs of their pagan ancestors, and this ritual represents a remarkable integration of the two. The man in the foreground, known as an *adivino*, led the ceremony, assisted by his wife, the *adivina*, who stands beside him. The table bears the offering to the gods.



An assistant — always a midwife by profession — prays aloud as she wafts a clay brazier of burning incense over an offering of food, liquor, and "stars" (see photo p. 46). She moves the brazier to form the sign of the cross. Since ancient times, copal has been used as incense in sacred rites. The subject of this ceremony, a little girl, remained in bed inside her house, her spirit being represented by a paper doll with an article of her clothing. The illness had been diagnosed vaguely as some kind of mental disorder. In Mexico, mental illness is widely regarded as a symptom of bewitchment.



The man without a hat in this picture is the father of the sick child, and he is accompanied by two women who assisted during the costumbre. The basket carried by the woman on the left contained food, liquor, and incense for the offerings. The woman on the right carries a handful of curative herbs used in the cleansing rite. Herbs absorb the sickness from the patient's body and, after the cleansing, must be buried or thrown away far from the village, for they are highly contagious. The adivino's hand appears at the extreme right bearing a paper doll. This cutout represents the *sombra* (literally, shadow) or soul of the patient, which must be restored to the patient's body to effect a cure. Tepehuas believe that a person's soul may abandon the body for a short period without causing death, but simply warning of its imminence.





Here the adivino and his wife are holding woven palm ornaments laced with flowers, for the gods. Called "stars," they are used to decorate outdoor altars where food offerings are made to the gods. The man who has acquired the status of adivino is respected by the Tepehuas as a devoutly religious man who has close contact with their deities. He intercedes with gods of the earth, air, water and sun who are requested to cure the sick person. The supreme deity is the sun, who is identified as the Christian God; the moon, regarded as a malevolent entity, is not invoked. Tepehuas call their earth god Moctezuma.



The paper dolls cut out and used by the adivino in the curing ceremony may represent either the soul of the patient or the gods invoked. In pre-Columbian times, paper made from the bark of the amate (fig) tree was used, but now the adivino employs cheap tan scratch paper or colored tissue paper. To represent things, concepts or deities — not the soul of a specific person — the dolls are cut joined in groups of four and placed in layers to form "beds" that are thought to be reminiscent of the ritual codices used by the ancient adivinos, which were folded up like screens. When dolls for a cleansing rite are cut out of tissue paper, black, yellow, red or white are the colors chosen, black being the most powerful. The forms are standard and distinguished by their headdresses; stomach and heart are always indicated by triangular cuts.



Midwives, like the woman squatting here, are used as assistants in the grand curing ceremonies, and are considered qualified to perform simple cleansing rites alone. They are usually widows, and learn their profession by observing a friend or family member. Here, the paper doll in the box represents the spirit of the sick girl, and beside the box are the curative herbs used in the ceremony.



Musicians use violin and guitar to provide the sacred sounds required for the *costumbre*. Each step in the ceremony is signaled by a change in the music. The office of these specialists is considered a privileged one, and when they die their spirits go to a heaven called the Cerro de Oro (Gold Mountain) where they continue in their profession. The Cerro de Oro is also the home of the gods and the spirits of dead diviners. During a *costumbre*, an offering is made to the dead musicians. Should it be forgotten, the entire ceremony must be repeated.





*Of jonute de hule, this woman is making the type of doll that is the prerogative of midwives and adivinas. The strips of "paper" are roughly prepared from the bark of the rubber tree. As the strip is bound and tied into the shape of a little brush, a piece of copal is inserted to represent the heart.*



*This type, as well as the paper doll, is then "given life" by applying to it the blood of a bird, usually a chicken. Not shown here is the cleansing ceremony performed with the live chicken, the donor of the blood. Intoning continuous prayers, the adivino cleanses the body of each participant with the struggling chicken. At the climax of the ceremony, he stabs it with a pair of scissors and the blood begins to flow. It may be dripped directly on the dolls, or collected in a clay bowl like the one pictured here beside the quill paint brush. This sacrificial rite bears a striking resemblance to pre-Hispanic human sacrifice. Both religious ceremonies symbolize the ancient belief that men must feed their gods with blood.*



*As the ceremony draws to a close, the offerings are wrapped and some will be deposited, probably buried, in the vicinity of the patient's house. The doll representing the patient is usually placed on the home altar in company with the images of Catholic saints. If the patient's state should worsen, the doll is placed near the bed, so that it may watch more closely; otherwise it remains on the altar until convalescence is complete.*

*The costumbre is most frequently practiced privately, as a curative rite, but can be a public affair, to invoke divine aid in resolving community problems, such as drought.*



## Suburban Sorcery

Witchcraft may not be much of a problem for the prudent Indian, but it is a killer among modern-minded mestizos who live in town and cities. Strange as it seems, the victims are usually those who accept Western goals and denounce Indian superstitions.

The upwardly mobile mestizo wants a bigger house, fancier clothes, and more mistresses than his neighbors. He arouses antagonism by showing up the other fellow. When he has been shown up, he is smitten with anger and envy which must be promptly released. The most effective way of handling envy is by bewitching the people who caused it. Putting down the Gonzálezes seems simpler than keeping up with the Joneses.

Mestizo males have no monopoly on envy. Women are smitten with jealousy when their husbands start collecting mistresses for status symbols. The irate wife retaliates by bewitching her rivals, unless they do her in first.

The Satanic witchcraft practiced in cities and towns is a far cry from Indian witchcraft, although this distinction has been ignored by anthropologists. Indian witchcraft has little or no connection with the Christian Devil, who dominates the suburban sorcery scene. As



we have seen, the Indian witch is born fated to receive evil powers from pagan supernatural beings. He has no choice. Even if he did, an Indian witch would not stoop to associating with the Devil. Only mestizos are identified as agents of Satan.

The most feared witches in urban Mexico are those who make pacts with the Devil. They are not born to be witches. A Satanic witch voluntarily sells his soul to the Devil in exchange for wealth and power. For those who dream of get-rich-quick schemes, this one is hard to beat.

Unlike Indian witches, the Satanic witch must be educated for his profession. He learns sorcery by studying books on black, red, white and green magic. While the Indian witch works alone, Satanic witches work in groups to compound the force of their magic.

Satanic sorcery is much more commercialized than Indian witchcraft. The Indian witch works mainly for revenge against his own personal enemies, but the Satanic witch sells his services to the highest bidder. He will knock off almost anybody's enemy if the price is right. And the price may be fantastically high.

Our observations on suburban sorcery are based on the field work we carried out in the mestizo town of Tepepan, located on the highway between Mexico City and Xochimilco. Tepepan is a witchcraft center known throughout the Valley of Mexico as the village of witches, murderers, and thieves. The community is part peasant and part proletariat. Most families own land used for subsistence agriculture, but wage labor in Mexico City has become an alternative means of earning a living.

The religious prestige system is giving way to a secular system based on the competitive display of wealth and power. The increasing importance of materialistic goals has given rise to a growing fear of

witchcraft. Avoiding bewitchment is much more difficult for the mestizo than for the Indian. Indians can steer clear of witchcraft by simply following the rules of good conduct. These rules are spelled out by Indian culture and accepted by all members of the community.

In Tepepan, there are no clear-cut rules for achieving prestige and avoiding bewitchment. Some people follow the old-fashioned Indian rule of share-and-share-alike, while others follow Western rules for getting ahead of the neighbors. Conspicuous consumption is valued by some and condemned by others. The mestizo who outshines his fellows lives in constant dread of bewitchment.

Nearly all of our informants had been bewitched at least once, and some had suffered repeated attacks. The demand for sorcery keeps ten local witches working until all hours of the night. They are moonlighters whose regular income comes from respectable daytime jobs.

Tepepan has two kinds of witches — Satanic witches and born witches. All of them claim to be *curanderos*. The Satanic witches are considered infinitely more powerful, more dangerous, and more numerous than the born witches.

Today the born witches are rather passé, since they represent an Indian tradition that is rapidly fading away. There are only three of these old-fashioned witches left in Tepepan. One is an ugly old hag who has a drinking problem. The second is an ex-vampire who has lost his power to suck blood. The third is our favorite, so come join us on a visit to him.

Accompanied by our next-door neighbor, we dropped in unannounced at the home of Don Pablo, the witch. His son, Don Francisco, was the only person in town who seemed impressed by our letter of introduction from Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and

History. He expressed an avid interest in Mexican history. It would be a privilege for him to contribute to our research on Mexican folk medicine. We were surprised by such a cordial reception.

Don Francisco seated us in the courtyard near an abandoned *temazcal*, which had formerly been used for sweat baths required at the completion of native curing rites. His wife, Benita, came out to join us, but the witch himself was nowhere to be seen. He didn't trust strangers; but his curiosity finally got the better of him. The old man sauntered out and sat on a log behind us where he could eavesdrop without saying a word.

After beating around the bush for a decent interval, we inquired about the extent of witchcraft in Tepepan. Doña Benita answered: "Now that we are civilized, we no longer believe in witchcraft." Obviously, we would have to take another tack. Since Don Pablo was reputed to be both a curer and a witch, we asked our hosts how he had obtained his curing powers. His son told us this story:

"When my father was 15 years old, he fell into a trance and dreamed about the *aires*. The *aires* are little men and women like dwarfs. They are also called *indios* or *guarines* because they speak the Nahuatl Indian tongue and are too stupid to understand Spanish. The men wear huaraches (sandals), *calzones* (white cotton trousers), *camisas* (shirts), and *fajas* (hand-woven belts). The women wear the *chinquete* (a long, wrap-around skirt) and the *quechquemitl* (a triangular cape).

"The *aires* offered my father jars containing herbs, eggs, and red flowers. He did not want to accept these gifts because he thought the *aires* might want him to become a witch. The *brujo de naturaleza* (natural-born witch) also receives eggs and herbs from the *aires*. 'If

you do not receive us, we will punish you and you will die,' the *aires* told my father. But he refused and they made him sick for two months. He could not eat or drink and he fell into a trance for an hour every day. In these trances, he walked in beautiful gardens and came to the place of the *aires*."

All of a sudden, the witch took over the narrative:

"My bones ached and I knew the *aires* would kill me if I did not receive them. At midnight I received two dozen eggs and herbs. Then a cock began to sing, and I saw an old man covered with sores. The *aires* told me to lick him. I did this in my dream and he got well. I woke up begging for food and drink. After that, I got well and started curing."

We didn't learn much about witchcraft from Don Pablo, but we did find out that both the *curandero* and the born witch receive their powers from the *aires*. Later we heard that the *aires* present the witch with pins, nails, thorns, and worms, which become the tools of his trade.

The stories of Don Pablo's adventures in sorcery came from his neighbors. They say he has bewitched about 20 people, mostly neighbors, who annoyed him in one way or another. He did it all for revenge, without any thought of making money.

Don Pablo works his witchcraft on Tuesdays and Fridays, which are witches' days in Mexico. He inflicts illness by sticking pins in a rag doll fashioned to look like his enemy. The hex works best if the doll is made with pieces of the victim's hair and clothing. Then the doll must be named after the victim.

With the last jab of the pin, the witch's work has just begun. In this business nothing can be left to chance. An efficient witch must check to make sure his hex is working on schedule. He can't just pop into the victim's house in his human form, because that



would give away his secret and invite retaliation. So he transforms himself into a dog, pig, turkey, or burro before pattering in to check on the victim's progress. Don Pablo changes into animal form by turning around three times and rolling on the floor.

People used to be afraid of Don Pablo, but he doesn't scare them much any more. It is said that his time has passed. Old age has drained away his power. About Doña Rufina, the alcoholic witch, people are not so sure. She is old, too, but it is not certain that her power is gone.

Doña Rufina is an ugly crone with bloodshot eyes who has bewitched people for pay as well as revenge. Her witching techniques are manifold. She can send hair into her victim's stomach and slip magic powders in his food. She uses her evil eye deliberately to harm children.

Nobody knows how, but it is said that Doña Rufina drove a man insane with sorcery. She bewitched him, out of anger and envy, because he bought a piece of land she wanted. His sickness began with chills and stomach-aches. Then he went crazy on Tuesdays and Fridays. He tore off his wife's clothes, burned them up, and beat her nude body. When he threw away his images of the saints, everybody in town knew he had gone mad.

The madman went to five or six city doctors, but his condition continued to worsen. Finally a Spiritist told him he had been bewitched by a dark, fat woman who lived near the church. The description fitted Doña Rufina perfectly. So the madman ambushed the witch and beat her until she begged forgiveness. He was promptly restored to sanity without any further treatment. Throughout Mexico, insanity is attributed to witchcraft. That is why modern medicine cannot cure mental illness.

Doña Rufina is accused of killing her second husband by witchcraft. He beat her regularly because she drank too much and didn't have his meals ready on time. Wife beating is a controversial matter which causes much marital discord in Tepepan. All men and some women accept wife-beating as just punishment for neglecting household duties. The trouble is that some husbands abuse this privilege; and then there are some women who refuse to take their punishment. Our informants thought Doña Rufina deserved to be beaten by her husband, but the beatings made her very angry. She decided to get even by ridding herself of him for good.

When he became sick at his stomach, he went to a city doctor. Doctors cannot cure bewitchment, so the patient died. After his death, Doña Rufina showed her neighbors an x-ray picture of his stomach with a black spot in the middle. She said the spot was a lump resulting from his having been kicked in the stomach by a horse, but the neighbors said the spot was a handful of hair put there by sorcery.

It took us many months to identify the Satanic witches of Tepepan because people were afraid of them. We finally obtained the names of seven. One was the woman who survived the attempted murder described in our initial chapter. We never met her, but we were told that she is an ugly woman who bewitches with her spittle. She is not only a witch but a Protestant, as well, which is almost as sinful as being a witch. She belongs to a secret society of Satanic witches.

Group sorcery is very fashionable in Tepepan. It is felt that witches are more successful when they get together to talk over their problems and work out a common solution. They meet at a private home to plot the plan of attack and set the hour. Then they all

synchronize their watches and go home. At the appointed moment, each witch starts sticking pins in his image of the victim. While the witch is jabbing away, he recites a spell guaranteed to produce sickness.

Members of the group learn these techniques, and many more, from books on magic. Black magic produces sickness and an unlimited variety of catastrophes. One is blurred vision, which causes the victim to fall over a cliff or smash himself in an automobile accident. Green magic enables the witch to change into animal form. Red and white magic are used to solve love problems.

The most powerful figure in Satanic sorcery is Don Antonio Vargas. He is feared more than any other witch in Tepepan. We first met him when we went to his house at night and found him drinking with a group of men. Repulsive was the word for this pudgy man with the sagging jowls, greasy moustache, and dirty clothes.

Don Antonio poses as a healer and a diviner, but is regarded as a charlatan in these fields. His exorbitant fees range from 50 to 500 pesos. Rumor has it that he spends most of his income on wine and women during business trips. People describe him as arrogant, greedy, and quarrelsome. They say he quarrels constantly with his wife. He has no neighbors because people are afraid to live near him.

When Don Antonio made a pact with the Devil, the Devil's picture was painted on his back with blood. The blood painting was made by a boy named José. The story was told to us as follows:

"José cut his own veins at the elbow with a piece of glass and, with his own blood, he painted the Devil on Antonio's back. Since Antonio's power came from the Devil, he uses the Devil's arts — black and red magic. I heard from another *curandero* that Antonio has a

scorpion on his head that helps him cure. He said the scorpion causes Antonio to sweat all over his face when he works. They say he has a spirit, too, and cures with *Siete Machos* (Seven He-Men) perfume. People from Xochimilco who believe in spirits come to him often. About ten years ago, he repented and quit working for the Devil for a while. He gave the Virgin of Los Remedios two dresses and a silver crown as part of his repentance. But he soon took up magic again. When he works black magic, the victim feels very sleepy and has pains in his arms and legs."

The witch's *compadre* (buddy) confirmed the story that Antonio received his power from the Devil.

"Witches who learn magic from books must sign a pact with the Devil, promising him their souls," he explained. "In return, the Devil helps them to make a lot of money . . . The only spirit Antonio has is the Devil."

Antonio himself told us an entirely different tale:

"People here say I am a witch, but I am not. I received my curing powers from an angel of light. When I was 39 years old, the shadow of an angel of light appeared to me at 11 p.m. The angel told me I must receive that which is natural and that which is supernatural in order to cure and to work witchcraft. But I did not want to do evil. I told the angel I wanted to take the good road. Then I saw three more angels. They were my spirit protectors. Their names are Adonai, Ariel, and Anael. They come whenever I need them for a cure. They explain who bewitched my patient, how he was bewitched, and how I should cure him."

We tactfully inquired whether he had any idea how witchcraft worked. Indeed he did.

"Witches do their harm with dolls, powders, photographs, or clothing," Antonio replied. "A witch who



has his victim's photograph writes on the back of it the victim's name and the number of years his suffering is supposed to last. When the specified time is up, the victim will die.

"Any article of the victim's clothing may be used for witchcraft. A shoe, for example. The witch draws a picture of the victim, or writes his name, in the shoe. If the witch puts the shoe in the sun, the victim develops a fever. If he puts the shoe in a river, the victim gets chills."

The witch's transforming ability was described to us by a curer who heals the disease produced by Antonio. After the witch has done his dirty work, he goes to the victim's house to see if the hex has taken effect. To do this without attracting attention, Antonio turns himself into a black cat. We obtained an eyewitness account:

"One night," the curer related, "I went to cure a woman who had been bewitched by Antonio and six other witches. As I left her house, I saw a cat on the roof. It jumped down and I hit it with a stick, because I knew it was the witch who had made my patient sick. That cat was Antonio. He ran away."

In discussing the local roster of witches, we noticed that our informant classified Antonio as a *brujo* but referred to Don Pablo as an *hechicero*. Only the Satanic witch qualified as a *brujo* in his terminology. The old-fashioned witch was merely an *hechicero* (sorcerer) whose supernatural helpers are weak sisters compared with the Devil and his hordes of demons. The demons who assist the Satanic witch were described thusly:

"Some look like men and some have the faces of angels. From the waist down they are animals. Their feet are the feet of goats, chickens, or turkeys. Sometimes they appear with tails and horns and long black hair."

The *aires* who assist the *hechicero* look like dwarf-sized Indians. There are two kinds of *aires* — black and white. The white ones are the good *aires* who help the *curandero de aire*. The black ones are the bad *aires* who help the *hechicero*. They make him eat meat in his dreams. This symbolic act means that he must figuratively eat human flesh for the rest of his life. Some individuals receive power from both black *aires* and white *aires*, thus enabling them either to cure or to harm.

This informant was the only one who made a black-and-white classification of the *aires*. His distinction between the *brujo* and the *hechicero* also seemed to be unique. Other people told us both words had the same meaning, although *brujo* was more commonly employed.

During our visits with Antonio the Witch, we tried to find out how many cases of sickness were attributed to witchcraft in Tepepan. He told us he had cured about 170 victims in the past year. Some 70 were Tepepan residents, and the rest lived in other suburban towns near Mexico City. He wanted us to understand that these figures told only a small part of the witchcraft story.

"Many victims do not realize they are bewitched, because they do not believe in witchcraft," he explained. "These people go to doctors instead of curers and, of course, they die. Doctors cannot cure bewitchment."

Although Satanic witchcraft flourishes in towns and cities all over Mexico, it is barely mentioned in the literature. In Yucatán, Redfield observed that sickness was more frequently attributed to black magic in the cities and towns than in the Indian villages. He concluded that black magic was an expression of insecurity in the city, where economic competition tends to isolate the individual from his family and the local group.



## Spiritism and Spiritualism

Spiritist curing is the answer to Satanic witchcraft. Men who died by violence materialize in Spiritist temples whenever their spirits are called down to cure the sick. The most famous spirits are those of Pancho Villa, Jesus Christ, Francisco I. Madero, and the Aztec Emperor Cuauhtemoc.

Spiritism is perhaps the fastest growing cult in Latin America. Spiritist societies have gained tremendous followings in urban areas of Brazil, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. Although Spiritism is sometimes mistaken for a primitive survival, it is a strictly modern movement which has rarely penetrated the Indian communities of Mexico.

A Frenchman called Allen Kardec founded the pseudo-science of Spiritism in the mid-nineteenth century. He discovered that spirits of the dead maintain regular contact with spirits of the living, through dreams. Kardec identified two kinds of spirits: good and bad. The good kind are known as spirits of light, and the bad variety are called dark spirits. A bad spirit can be recognized by its fierce, bestial appearance. A good spirit may look like an angel with wings, long hair, and a robe. Spirits of light are supposed to help the Spiritist curer in his efforts to combat the dark spirits, who work for Satanic witches. Nevertheless, Mexican Spiritists are often suspected of collaborating with dark spirits.

Spiritism first appeared in Mexico at the time of Maximilian's empire (1864-67). Mexican President



Francisco I. Madero, before his rise to political eminence, became a Spiritist, and served as commissioner for the First Mexican Spiritist Congress held in Mexico City in 1906. The Congress established a center of experimental medium studies and a federation of all Mexican Spiritist societies.

Both pure and applied Spiritism are to be found in Mexico City today. Spiritist research is conducted by a group of prominent Mexican intellectuals, who founded the Mexican Institute of Psychic Investigations in 1944. Applied Spiritism is practiced in some 200 "temples," mostly private homes.

One of the main Spiritist centers is the temple of the Asociación Civil Juana de Asbaje. The most famous consultant at this temple is Cuauhtemoc, the last ruler of the Aztecs, who was first tortured, then hanged, by the Spaniards. Sick people come to the temple on Mondays and Thursdays for consultations with a curing spirit. They describe their symptoms to the spirit, who communicates through the mouth of a medium. A sizeable fee is charged for one consultation, and a series of treatments is required for a cure. For a considerably larger fee, the spirit of a dead doctor will perform an operation with invisible instruments.

Pancho Villa is a popular curing spirit in northern Mexico, but he is said to use shocking language. His dark spirit has been roaming around Chihuahua ever since the revolutionary hero died there, struck down by an assassin's bullet.



Isabel Kelly tells how the spirit of Pancho Villa came to treat a young man who appeared to be insane. Speaking through a medium, Villa announced in objectionable language that evil spirits had taken possession of the boy. He drove out the evil spirits by whipping them and shouting at them. At every shout, the boy let out a cry of pain. After each treatment he was black and blue from the blows he had received. The treatments continued until the patient was completely cured.

Spiritist curers trained in Mexico City temples practice in suburban towns throughout the Valley of Mexico. Some of the curers, and most of their patients, are Catholics. Our informants seemed totally unaware of the official conflict between Spiritism and Catholicism. Kardec denounced Catholicism as an enemy of science, progress, and Spiritism.

Don Raúl is the only fully trained Spiritist healer in Tepepan. He became a curer because it was a matter of life or death. He had been bewitched for two years before going to a Spiritist temple for treatment. His trouble began when his uncle invited him to dinner. A funny thing happened after he got there. Nobody gave him anything to eat.

"My relatives kept looking for something," he recalled. "At the time I did not know why. Now I am sure they were looking for magic powders to put in my food. I was very angry with them. They treated me like a poor man and kept me waiting."

At last, Raúl was given a plate with very little food and hardly any meat. His uncle just walked away and did not come back to offer him a second helping. Raúl left in a huff.

"The next day I had a terrible headache and stomachache," he said. "My body felt like rubber and I seemed to be floating up into another world. For two years I went to one doctor after another, but they said there

was nothing wrong with me. My chickens died and my dogs got sick and many bad things happened to me, leaving me very poor."

Raúl stopped consulting doctors and started going to bewitchment specialists, but they too failed to cure him. Then he went to Antonio the Witch, who used a deck of cards to divine the cause of his illness. He found out that Raúl had been bewitched by the uncle who gave him the poor meal. The uncle wanted a piece of land that Raúl had bought, so he bewitched his nephew out of envy and a desire for revenge.

Antonio gave Raúl the treatment for bewitchment and charged him 380 pesos for the first visit. He wanted more money for the second treatment, so Raúl went away and did not return to complete the cure. His treatment did no good anyway. Raúl thinks Antonio is a fake who is in the curing business solely to make money.

In December, 1944, Raúl went to a Spiritist temple in Mexico City, where a healer told him to lie down and rest. He dreamed that he entered a beautiful garden. Angels dressed in white lay asleep on the grass. He liked what he saw, except that he was afraid the angels would wake up and beat him. Then he saw the Lord. He told Raúl he would have to become a healer if he wanted to recover his health. Otherwise, he would die. Raúl woke up frightened and decided not to return to the temple.

That night a ghost knocked on his door three times. When Raúl opened the door nobody was there. The next night the ghost returned, and Raúl became sick with fright. He went again to the temple and agreed to become a healer. For nine years he studied at the temple. His first guardian spirit appeared within three months.

"I went into a trance," Raúl recalled, "and I did not know anything that happened, until I woke up and they gave me a piece of paper with my spirit's name on it. It was the spirit of my dead grandfather. While I was possessed by his spirit, my grandfather spoke through my mouth giving his name and announcing that he was a guardian spirit. Before I became a healer, I had seen his ghost walking down the street. His body was like a shadow and it was full of light."

"My grandfather died when he was shot by the Zapatistas (followers of Emiliano Zapata, agrarian leader in the Revolution of 1910), and he became a dark spirit doomed to wander over the earth. But one night he took some light out of a live person's head, and that is how he became a spirit of light. He did not have to wander any more, so he came to the temple and entered my brain."

His second spirit was Francisco I. Madero, the president of Mexico who was assassinated in 1913, during the Mexican Revolution. People who die by violence always become dark spirits who are earth-bound and cannot enter heaven. They are the spirits who cause fright sickness. Madero's spirit worked with Raúl for seven years.

"A year ago, God replaced Francisco Madero with María Luisa de Amacacegua of the Aztec tribe," Raúl explained. "No healer can have more than two guardian spirits at a time. When I am curing, my grandfather's spirit comes to me one day and María Luisa the next day."

A Spiritist curer must go to the temple at least three days a week as long as he lives. Monday is the day of light. Dark spirits go to the temple on Monday, to obtain light from the brain of the Lord. Wednesday is the day that healers are possessed by their guardian

spirits. Thursday is the day that Jesus Christ comes to the temple to deliver his weekly sermon.

"Rays of light descend on a healer, and Jesus talks through the healer's lips," Raúl told us. "People who come to the temple can ask Jesus questions about how to get well, or about any of their problems."

The divine light which Spiritist healers receive from God combats the powers of darkness that witches receive from the Devil, according to Don Raúl. We asked him to give us an example. He related the following case history:

"Agapito was bewitched by friends who envied him because he had better food and clothes than they did. They hired a witch here in Tepepan. I know who she is, but I cannot tell you. She made him sick by sticking pins in a doll and throwing the doll in the fire."

"He went to doctors. He went to herbalists. He went to temples. He went to the Casa Nelli Mule and the Casa Sulema Morai in Mexico City for cures. He even went to a veterinarian. Then he went to Milpa Alta to see his *compadres* who are curers. Niño Fidencio, the famous curer, treated him and took him to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Nothing helped. Agapito was confined to bed all the time."

"One morning he sent for me. He was yellow and swollen and could not walk or sit. I examined him. Then my first spirit spoke through my mouth. I was unconscious, so I heard nothing that the spirit said. Agapito's daughter heard the spirit say my patient was bewitched."

Raúl performed a cleansing treatment by stroking the patient with herbs, unbroken eggs, and a cheap perfume quaintly known as *Siete Machos*. "Seven He-Men" is one of the trademarks of Spiritist curing. When the eggs were broken and poured into a glass of



water, they came out foamy and dirty, confirming the spirit's diagnosis of bewitchment. For the last cleansing, Raúl used only his hands. The treatment was repeated daily for 25 days. Agapito began walking after the first treatment, and he was completely cured at the end of the series.

Earth from graves (*tierra del muerto*) was used to bewitch another one of Raúl's patients. The man was bewitched by a woman who envied him because he had plenty to eat and a nice house. He grew thin and bent and turned yellow. His employer took him to an English hospital in Mexico City where x-rays showed three stones in his stomach. They told him he must have surgery. That was when he went to Raúl, who diagnosed his ailment as bewitchment and cured him. Later a pile of earth from graves was found in the man's patio.

The most celebrated healer of Tepoztlan specializes in treating bewitchment with techniques similar to those described by Raúl. He gives the appearance of being dead when he goes into a trance. Then he begins to speak as if he were in a deep sleep. First, he diagnoses his patient's illness, and then explains what must be done to protect the individual and his family from the enemy who is causing the illness. Treatment includes cleansings and liquid medication prepared by the healer. Before leaving, the patient must cleanse himself with the peso bills used to pay for the treatment.

This healer is also believed to be a powerful sorcerer. He is a wealthy man who has a flourishing practice. Seven female assistants help him treat the sick, but there is gossip to the effect that they are also his mistresses, one for each night of the week.

In Mexico, the growth of Spiritism (*espiritismo*) has been paralleled by a rival sect known as Spiritualism

(*espiritualismo*). The two sects have often been confused by foreign anthropologists and Mexicans who do not belong to either sect.

Spiritists (*espiritistas*) and Spiritualists (*espiritualistas*) belong to separate groups with distinct historical origins. Mexican Spiritualism was founded by a priest named Roque Rojas, according to oral tradition reported by Isabel Kelly. Her informants said Spiritualism began in 1866 near the small town of Contreras, southwest of Mexico City. It was here that Roque Rojas went into a trance and subsequently assumed the name of Padre Elías (Father Elijah). He came to be identified with the Prophet Elijah and the Holy Ghost, who are prominently mentioned in Spiritualist curing rites today.

Spiritist publications denounce Spiritualism as "an amalgam of religions formed to discredit Spiritism." Spiritualists accuse Spiritists of working with dark spirits of people who died by violence and became earthbound sources of sickness. Spiritist hero Francisco Madero is said to have become a dark spirit after his assassination.

Both Spiritists and Spiritualists cure sickness, but it is the Spiritists who specialize in curing bewitchment. The greater popularity of Spiritist curing seems to be based on success in combating witchcraft. It is not uncommon for Spiritualist curers to refuse to give treatment in cases of bewitchment.

Mary Cassaretto has published a study showing that 121 Spiritualist houses of prayer were officially registered with the Mexican government in 1955. The heaviest concentration is in the states of Mexico, Morelos, Puebla, and the Federal District.

The only Spiritualist curer in Tepepan is a refined little old lady named Doña Anita. She became a curer

just before we arrived, and she was the only one in town who did not charge any fee for her treatments. She cures because she wants to help people, not to make money. Curing is what the Lord wants her to do.

When Doña Anita starts talking about the Lord, her eyes light up and she is carried away with religious fervor. Like other local healers, she learned to cure after a serious illness. Her children took her to a Spiritualist temple in Xochimilco after modern medical treatment failed to cure her paralysis. There she learned that a dark spirit was responsible for her illness.

A Spiritualist healer cleansed her with his hands and told her to pray to the Lord, asking Him to give light to the dark spirit. She did so, and returned to the temple to complete a series of three cleansings. After each one her condition improved. Then she was instructed to beg for alms in Tepepan and use the money to pay for a mass for the dark spirit who was following her. When this was done, the dark spirit became a spirit of light and stopped doing harm. Doña Anita promptly recovered. Then it was her duty to cure others, by giving light to the dark spirits that cause sickness.

Six months later a guardian spirit appeared to Doña Anita while she was sitting in the temple with her eyes closed. He was an Aztec who introduced himself as Miguel Solís. Let Doña Anita describe him in her own words:

"Miguel wore earrings, head feathers, bracelets, and anklets. His suit was yellow with big shiny buttons and it fitted him tightly, like a bullfighter's suit. He wore leggings, and there was a cape over his shoulders. He stood with his hands on his hips and spoke to me, saying: 'If you do not accomplish the mission assigned to you by Our Lord, I will take you with me.'"

Doña Anita knew what that meant. If she refused, she would be a dead doña, so she accepted. She went to the temple twice a week for one year before she learned to cure. Each time she saw Miguel and he gave her instructions.

She cures all kinds of sickness, except bewitchment. Her treatments always begin with a prayer addressed to Padre Elías. She learned this prayer from Miguel. Then she cleanses the patient with her hands. When she goes out of her house, she leaves Miguel's name written on a piece of paper. If a patient comes while she is gone, he can simply walk into her house and call out Miguel's name. He comes as soon as he is called to perform a cure.

Doña Anita told us that Spiritualists worship in their own temples instead of going to Catholic churches. They have silent confession and invisible communion. Spiritualists do not believe in worshipping images of saints, she said. On the thirteenth of each month, the Lord comes to the Spiritualist temple in Xochimilco and speaks through the mouth of one of the *peristales*. They are the most advanced curers. The Lord teaches the Spiritualists how to cure, and they ask Him to give light to the dark spirits.

Dark spirits cause sickness, accidents, quarrels, and all kinds of trouble. Our other informants had told us that dark spirits came from the world of the dead, but Doña Anita said this is not always the case. Living people, who lack knowledge of the Bible and Spiritualism, also have dark spirits. She looked at us with real concern and suggested that we could use a little light.

Spiritualist curers give light to dark spirits wherever they find them. Doña Anita goes to requiem masses to give light to the spirits of the dead, and attends



fiestas to light up the dark spirits of the living. Whenever she sees a Catholic priest, she says a silent prayer asking that he may give light to his people by explaining the Bible to them.

In northern Mexico and southern Texas, the cult of Pedro Jaramillo seems more akin to Spiritualism than Spiritism. Don Pedro was a famous *curandero* from Guadalajara who settled at Los Olmos Ranch, near Falfurrias, Texas, in 1881. Mexicans on both sides of the border revered him as a saint, and began to call him San Pedro (St. Peter) after his death in 1907. His good name was never linked with witchcraft.

Don Pedro received the gift of healing from God while he was still working in Mexico. At that time, he was suffering from a painful affliction of the nose. One night he buried his face in the mud at the edge of a pool in the woods to relieve the pain. He stayed there, treating himself with the mud, and at the end of three days he was well. He returned home and went to sleep, and it was then that a voice told him he had received the gift of healing from God. The voice also told him his master was sick and he should cure him. Don Pedro went to his master and prescribed the first thing that came into his mind — a tepid bath daily for three days. He always prescribed in this manner. His master recovered.

There is no hint of Spiritualism in the story of Don Pedro's life. He did not go into trances or call on any spirits other than God. Some of his most remarkable cures were performed by merely prescribing a glass of water, or a bath, to be taken in the name of God. He made no charge for his treatments, although his patients left small voluntary contributions if they cared to. Those who had no money were treated without expectation of payment.

It is the spirit of the dead Don Pedro who has become a part of the Spiritualist pantheon. His spirit is regularly called down for consultations with the sick at Spiritualist temples in Torreón and Monterrey. The treatments he prescribes in death are much more elaborate than those he used in real life.

Unlike the live Don Pedro, his spirit sometimes treats cases of bewitchment. He also schedules conferences with people needing advice on all kinds of problems other than sickness. During a session with a Torreón medium, Isabel Kelly had the honor of meeting the spirit of Don Pedro and discussing her real estate problems with him.

Redfield indicates that spirit curing is extremely common in Mérida, Yucatán, but it is not clear whether he is referring to Spiritism or Spiritualism. Most of the cures he cites were prescribed for bewitchment.



An ancient god speaks, standing behind the seated figure eating hallucinogenic mushrooms. In the original (*Magliabechiano Codex*), the mushrooms on the left are painted jade green, the color used to identify an object of great worth.



## Do-It-Yourself Magic

Mexicans know many magic formulas that can be performed without the services of witches or curers. Do-it-yourself magic provides fascinating techniques for solving sexual problems. Of course, they don't always work, but they are just as effective as psychiatry and so much less expensive. You may want to try some of these formulas.

If you are having trouble courting a girl, try carrying a dead hummingbird in your pocket. Men who do this are sought after and loved by many women. The hummingbird charm is widely used in Indian communities, where other forms of sex magic are scorned.

To seduce a girl, put the leg of a beetle in her glass of soda pop. This makes her a little crazy and creates a desire for sexual relations. The same effect can be achieved with a powder made of crushed bones from a human skull, but an overdose causes insanity. Lewis describes what happened to a girl in Tepoztlan when she was given an overdose:

"A youth of twenty-four liked a girl very much and decided to 'corner' her and speak to her, but she insulted him. This happened three times. He still wanted her. A friend advised him to get some magical skull powder and put it into a drink for her. He did this, but gave her too large a dose. Then the girl began to feel so much desire for him that she went to his house alone. The boy's parents refused to let her stay, and she became *loca* (crazy) and a street woman. The authorities jailed her. Later a man took pity on her, married her, and 'cured' her."

A magic lodestone known as *piedra imán* is sold as a love charm in the markets of Puebla, Torreón and

## Paraphernalia on following pages

other Mexican cities. Frances Toor bought a dried hummingbird and a lodestone from a Puebla vendor, who instructed her to wear the charms next to her heart if she wanted just one man to love her. If she wanted more than one man, she was to wear the charms in her stocking. To keep the magic alive in the stone, she was supposed to wash it in wine every Tuesday and Friday.

The mistreated wife can control her husband by putting jimsonweed (*toloache*) in his coffee. This technique is used in Tepoztlan by women whose husbands beat them too much. A small dose makes an abusive husband docile and easy to manage, but an overdose produces madness. The dominated husband is unaware of his changed condition and can do nothing about it. The personality change produced by jimsonweed is best described in the words of Lewis' informant:

"Before his marriage he was a strong man but after a while he became weak, thin, humble, and always kept his head down. That is why we believe she gave him something. She is the mother, the queen. She is all and he is her servant."

All mildness and passivity in men is attributed to jimsonweed poisoning, or witchcraft, in Tepoztlan. A healthy male is expected to rule the roost with absolute authority. If he brooks any interference from his wife, or allows her to have lovers, it is a sure sign he has been drugged with jimsonweed.

The upside-down candle formula is used to subdue wife-beaters in Tepepan. We heard of a woman who used this technique because her husband was a drunkard and beat her so hard that the children ran out of



## Witchcraft

Clockwise: Chicken, used  
eye; old photograph;  
ribbon around  
from victim's

doll stuck  
devil;  
charm wound  
thread;  
incense

## Paraphernalia

sacrifice; ojo de venado, amulet against evil  
herbs; water; oil; chile pepper; hair; measuring  
candle; crosses; lodestones; doll made  
clothing; toad; playing cards;  
loache (jimsonweed);  
with pins; paper cut-out  
ather; dried hummingbird  
with magic-colored  
religious image;  
egg; snake skin.



the house screaming. Here is how she changed him into a nice husband:

First she bought a couple of yards of red ribbon. When her husband passed out on the bed, she measured him with the ribbon so it would be exactly the same length as his body. Next she bought a one-peso candle. Then she tied the red ribbon around the middle of the candle and burned it upside down every night until it was completely consumed.

Similar ribbon techniques are used to dominate men in other parts of Mexico. A woman measures her man with a ribbon while he is asleep, because he must know nothing about it if the magic is to work. His length of ribbon is then rolled up with a scapular medal of St. Anthony. The ribbon and the medal must never be separated.

Infidelity and desertion are combated with an infinite variety of sex magic in Mexican cities and towns. To keep a straying husband in tow, put a live horned toad in a jar and bury it under the floor of your house. Every day you must open the jar and feed the toad. A Tepepan man who wanted to leave his wife was trapped by this technique for two years. One day, when she opened the jar to feed the toad, it jumped out and ran away. Her husband left home the same day and never returned.

The weirdest story of kitchen magic in northern Mexico is, without doubt, the case of the toad in the eggshell. It begins just before midnight somewhere in the Laguna area. Two women huddle in the dark awaiting the magic hour. It arrives. One woman turns to the other and makes a dramatic announcement: "My husband is a rake." She digs a hole in the floor. In the hole she buries her husband's shoe. She takes out a Ouija board and begins to pray. It is dark, dark. Then comes a beam of light. The light comes closer,

closer. The woman speaks to the light. "Is it true that Federico is living with that woman in Torreón?" The Ouija board begins to write. It finishes. The light fades away. The two women turn on an electric light to read the message. It is the toad-in-the-eggshell formula.

Five days pass. The two women meet again in the middle of the night. One is holding a live toad. The other perforates an eggshell and removes its contents. The toad is inserted in the eggshell with its head sticking out. The toad in the shell is slung in a net and hung in the hood of the hearth. The wife of the rake prays and prays. The magic works. "Look," she says, "he is going to come. Federico is coming to live with us. The toad is Federico and will not go away." And so it comes to pass that the rake returns to his wife and never sees the other woman again. This tale is taken from Isabel Kelly's book on folk medicine in North Mexico.

Tepepan women patronize a specialist in love magic who sells formulas for holding husbands. No supernatural power from evil spirits is required to make these formulas work. They can be performed by anybody who knows the proper procedure. Here is the popular chile pepper formula:

Buy two large *chiles pasillas*. Place them in the form of a cross and tie them together with a red ribbon. Put the cross beneath your husband's pillow. Then stop worrying. He won't be able to leave home.

The bloody coffee formula is more dangerous. It can produce instant insanity. The following story is a case in point.

Rosa went to the love specialist after her husband had thrown her out for going with another man. She was told to collect some of her own menstrual blood, dry it, and grind it into a powder. The powdered



blood was put in the husband's coffee. He went mad right after drinking it, and had to be committed to a mental institution in Mexico City. When he returned to Tepepan, he refused to take Rosa back. The bloody coffee formula had failed.

If you have been jilted by a girl, you can make her hair fall out. When she's not looking, cut off a little piece of her hair. Pour oil on the hair and leave it outside to dry for three days and nights. Then burn the hair. When this was done to a Tepepan girl, her hair fell out in handfuls until she was completely bald. Her hair never grew back, even though she went to many doctors. She still wears a turban.

The people of Mitla know how to harm an enemy by threatening a saint. The saint's image is tied up with a cord and locked in a box. Then the saint is warned that he will not be freed until he has afflicted the enemy. The precise form of the affliction may be specified. Appendicitis, for example.

Mitla women use holy images to wreak vengeance on unfaithful husbands. Charles Leslie tells the story of La Tehuana, who caught her husband making love to the maid. Screams of rage reverberated all over the neighborhood. When she fired the maid, her husband left home to live with his pretty, young sweetheart.

Furious with jealousy, La Tehuana lit candles before her household image of Jesús Nazareno, begging Him to strike her husband and his sweetheart with disease and misfortune. At noon, she put the image in the blazing sun to burn. Every day she repeated this procedure. She also worked with wax images, graveyard dirt, old photographs, and playing cards. Her husband gashed his forehead on a rock when he fell down drunk.

A man who wants to kill his woman can bury the tooth of a rattlesnake at the spot where she urinates

in the morning. That is supposed to make her dry up and die, according to Mitla love lore. We found no reports of deaths attributed to this cause.

If a mass for the dead is celebrated in the name of a living man, he will die. In Churubusco, two brothers quarreled over who would get the land left by their dead father. The elder brother went to church and asked the priest to perform a requiem mass using the brother's name. The brother fell ill immediately and died two years later.

A Tepepan woman wanted to use the same technique for killing her brother, because he took away the land her father had left her. When she went to church to arrange for the mass, she met Padre Juan, who is her uncle. He knew her brother was alive, so she could not tell him what she wanted. Instead, she buried her brother's photograph in the graveyard at midnight. The brother did not become ill or die, because there was no death mass said for him, but he changed from a loud man to a quiet one.

To catch a thief, serve each of the suspects a glass of holy oil. Doña Dolores wanted to catch the thief who stole her pig. She took some clean oil to the church and asked the sacristan to exchange it for holy oil. A little glass of oil was served to each of her neighbors and her son. When her son drank the oil, he broke out in black spots and ran a high fever. Then he confessed that he had stolen the pig. His mother took him to a doctor, but he died.

If you are robbed in Mitla, here is the way to punish the thief. Soak a candle in oil and salt. Burn it at the wrong end for St. Anthony on Friday at noon. Tell the candle of your loss and your wish for misfortune to befall the thief. Then wait for something terrible to happen.

Or go home and see a psychiatrist.

## By Way of Commentary



Regardless of the advances achieved by science in many fields of human activity, and despite the rational explanation it provides of phenomena that, until a short time ago, were attributed to supernatural causes, in a large part of the world magical-religious beliefs continue to be generally accepted, and form the core of cultural patterns displayed in daily conduct. In recent years, important social changes have altered relations between individuals and between groups, but there has been no corresponding cultural change to modify habits of thought and action that are out of tune with the wealth of new knowledge being accumulated by all the peoples of the world.

This cultural lag is apparent in countries that are in process of development. In them, economic well-being and the availability of services do not advance at the same rate in all sectors of the population; on the contrary, it is obvious that the distance separating the various sectors is ever greater. In Mexico, 90 percent of the inhabitants are protected by medical services and social security. This sector of the population includes government employees and workers organized in labor unions. All have a right to medical attention, to the prevention of illness, and to other benefits, offering them physical and psychological security of a type they previously lacked.

That percentage of the population comprising the so-called middle class, still not precisely defined, also turns to modern medicine for the satisfaction of its health needs; but, like the country's upper economic class, its members prefer to consult a physician in

private practice, once they possess sufficient income to pay the cost of medical treatment.

In Mexico, as in the rest of the world, people who make use of scientific medicine do not, for that reason, cease to call upon religion and magic to ease the uncertainty of a grave illness. Perhaps, among industrialized peoples, the display of beliefs and practices that are without a scientific basis is not as simple and open as among primitive and folk peoples. Possibly, also, magical-religious manifestations do not inevitably accompany all the crises of life; but, here and there, rational and irrational thought coexist, because both are constituent parts of man's nature.

We must concede, however, that in the western countries, stratified in social classes, those at the bottom of the social scale possess a minimal amount of scientific knowledge and a maximum number of magical-religious beliefs and practices, with which they solve their problems of physical and psychological insecurity. Such is the case of population groups in Mexico that do not yet have access to social medicine, and whose meager income prevents them from knocking at the door of private medicine, which becomes increasingly costly. The ideas and action patterns of folk medicine, always at hand, are the sole source from which they can extract a theory to explain an illness, the procedure for diagnosing it and predicting its probable course, and the tactics and medication its treatment demands.

The system of beliefs and practices that make up the body of traditional or folk medicine, and which,



today, constitute a legacy shared equally by this country's native ethnic groups and the urban and rural population on the fringes of economic development, was not simple in its origins. It resulted from the fusion of ideas and procedures that derived from three principal sources: 1) those that formed the body of Christian magic, especially those that flourished so abundantly in Europe during the 16th century; 2) those that were drawn from the Indian cultural systems, particularly that of the Aztecs established in the Valley of Mexico; and 3), those that were introduced unexpectedly with the importation of Africans destined for slavery. The magical-religious beliefs embodied in Renaissance Christianity are those that prevailed, and still prevail, overwhelmingly in Mexico; however, even though we allude to them in these observations, since they are so well known, we must not insist upon them. On the other hand, we will do well to devote some thought to the concepts, the extensive gamut of interests, and the broad field covered by pre-Columbian medicine, imposing upon the *ticitl* or medicine man a conspicuous role in his society.

Aztec medicine, impregnated with magic, was not concerned solely with the treatment and prevention of illnesses and accidents that might overtake members of the community. Its activities extended into fields that a modern doctor certainly would not regard as his. The Aztec *ticitl* was responsible not only for the health of persons, but also for that of the crops that fed the people and, consequently, the regulation of cosmic phenomena that might affect the welfare of the people. His obligations were even more extensive: society entrusted him with the singular task of maintaining group cohesion and the obedience of its members to traditional behavior patterns. This social-control function of native medicine was more important to the corporate group than that of resolving the anxieties that derived from sickness and accident.

*Attributes of Aztec physicians and healers as described in the Florentine Codex.*

### THE PHYSICIAN

The true physician:  
a wise man (*tlamatini*), gives life,  
An experienced judge of things:  
who, through experience, knows the herbs,  
the stones, the trees, the roots.  
He has tried out his remedies,  
experiments, examines,  
alleviates illnesses.  
He gives massage,  
sets bones.  
He physics people,  
makes them feel well,  
gives them potions,  
bleeds them, cuts and sews them,  
makes them react,  
covers with ash their wounds.



The false physician:  
mocks people,  
ridicules them,  
kills people with his medicines,  
provokes indigestion,  
aggravates sickness and makes people worse.  
He has his secrets,  
he keeps them,  
he is a sorcerer (*nahualli*),  
possesses seeds  
and knows maleficent herbs;  
a witch doctor, he prophesies with cords.  
He kills with his remedies,  
worsens, poisons with seeds and herbs.



### THE HEALER

The healer: well versed in herbs,  
who knows through experience the roots,  
the trees, the stones.  
She is experienced, tests her remedies,  
examines, keeps her secrets, her traditions.  
The good healer:  
cures people, helps them,  
puts them on their feet,  
eases their bodies,

brings them to convalescence,  
covers their wounds with ashes, cures, remedies,  
makes incisions, draws the blood, sews,  
purges people, gives them remedies.



The bad healer:  
has her traditions, keeps them,  
has her seeds, her powdered seeds,  
possesses her charms, her flowers,  
is like a *nahual*, sorceress,  
gives false remedies,  
kills with them,  
makes people worse,  
places them in danger,  
makes them sicken, causes them to die,  
ridicules people, is an affront to them.

*Translated from the Spanish text  
prepared by Demetrio Sodí Morales*

It is by no means our intention to deny the significant, rational contributions that native medicine made to scientific medicine. Medications used in Indian therapy, essentially those derived from plants, have been subjected to rigorous laboratory examination and their genuine pharmaceutical effectiveness has been proved. Hallucinogenic medicines, like peyote, *ololiuhqui* (probably a type of morning-glory), and *tecnanacatl* mushrooms, together with tobacco, the *salvias*, and the *daturas* (including many strong-scented herbs, shrubs or trees of the nightshade family), contain alkaloids and other active principles that were correctly employed in the treatment of ailments; but the explanation of that action was given not in rational, but in supernatural and magical, terms.

This different interpretation of the role of medicine helps us to understand the differences between the Aztec medicine man and the modern doctor, and how

the characteristics of the function of the former have come to constitute the personality of the present-day shaman. The *ticitl* was endowed not only with unfailing capacity to restore lost health, but also with the knowledge and skill —acquired through revelation to him by supernatural beings— necessary to do harm; that is, to cause illness and death. Sahagún, the celebrated Franciscan friar who was the first of the conquering missionaries to apply himself to the study of Indian culture, spoke of good and bad medicine men. Indians today refer to good and bad sorcerers, as though speaking of two different persons.

In Aztec medicine, the hostile desires of gods, ancestors, relatives or friends figure among the principal causes of illness. Diagnostic procedures are all directed toward discovering the causal agent of the ailment and, once it is known, treatment is limited to begging forgiveness of the god or ancestor for the offenses committed against him. If the agent is a relative or neighbor in the clutches of a sorcerer, the treatment first seeks pardon of the person offended and, failing that, the return of the damage by transferring the illness from patient to agent. To cure the subject placed under his care, the doctor is compelled, by the very essence of the causative theory postulated, to inflict damage on a third party: he is good for one and bad for the other.

The ambivalent role the medicine man is obliged to play is the characteristic that best demonstrates the social function of native medicine. In regarding the phenomenon of illness as a punishment for offenses or sins committed, the medicine man confers upon the affliction a social content. He does the same thing by regarding it as the inevitable consequence of hostile conduct on the part of a third party, who thus takes revenge for an undesirable act performed by the patient. If the sickness is a punishment, and the medicine man finds himself invested with the ability either to remove it or to impose it, as he



deems best, he becomes, inevitably, a powerful agent of social control.

Illness not being the result of a conflict of natural forces (the biological concept), but the reflection of a social conflict (the magical-religious concept), the patient becomes a social transgressor (which, in a religiously oriented society, is equivalent to saying that he is a violator of religious duties and loyalties); that is, a sinner, a delinquent. The consequences deriving from concepts like these are far-reaching.

No society could long endure if it came to depend exclusively upon punishments that make use of physical coercion to maintain the social order. In their evolution, the most advanced pre-Cortesian societies had established, long before the Conquest, a complicated legal apparatus destined to give coherence and unity to the group. Furthermore, they had at their disposal varied integrating mechanisms that aided them in harmonizing individual conduct within the patterns confirmed by tradition, obliging those who violated them to repent.

Among those mechanisms, the practice of medicine held a prominent position, although different in each ethnic group. Ruiz de Alarcón noted it in observing that "among Indians, those farthest removed from Mexican policy are much more superstitious." To preserve the *esprit de corps*, the societies of simple culture utilized with greater frequency the magical-religious instruments of medicine than did the confederations of states with a complex organization. In our day, Indian communities isolated from the national society are, also, those where the social function of medicine prevails.

As might be supposed, not all illnesses are invested with social content; only those that, for one reason or another, arouse great anxiety, even when they may not necessarily be serious. The Cruz-Badiano Codex—one of the 16th century Indian herbal treatises—devotes a paragraph to certain conditions of public

officials, and provides the remedies for their correction. According to native theory, the illness of an official is evidence of failure to comply with his duties: the sickness is a punishment for his negligence. In such circumstances, a state of illness arouses intense emotion, because it has been invested with a social content.

Other ailments, like those that do not respond readily to medical treatment, also generate an anxiety charged with social significance. The sick person is considered to be guilty of some error committed by him or by his relatives, and the group of which he forms a part firmly believes that the illness is his punishment for that error. This conviction is expressed when the medicine man proceeds to diagnose the evil through the pulsation method: the blood identifies the peccadillo that brought on the illness, indicates who caused it, and how it must be cured. Sometimes the public confession of sins reveals the violation of taboos, and thus the unknown factor is resolved. On other occasions, it is necessary to resort to the taking of hallucinogenic drugs to enter into direct communication with the supernatural beings and learn the reason for their displeasure. The ailments of children, many times, reflect the guilt of the parents, and it is the parents, not the children, who must be relieved of punishment. Officials, parents, the people in general, infants — in short, all members of the group are exposed to suffering the social effect that emerges from the state of sickness.

Once the relation between illness and social behavior is established, the actual presence of disease is not necessary in order for the medicine man to act as an agent of social control. The mere threat of exercising the functions his singular role bestows upon him is sufficient to bring a strong influence to bear in regulating the group's social behavior, and in maintaining and preserving traditional norms. These beliefs are inculcated at a very early age, through

the conditioning that governs the process of endoculturation and, from that time on, they are regarded as incontrovertible truths: they represent not only beliefs, but the bases for action as well

In contemporary Indian communities, and among rural and urban dwellers on the fringes of economic development, belief in illness as a punishment for violation of the moral code is so deep-rooted that one of the major hindrances to development programs designed to accelerate the rhythm of change among these people is precisely the fear of punishment displayed by the persons to be benefitted. For that reason, we may conjecture that, during the century of the Conquest, the social function of medicine was the factor that operated most effectively to preserve the stability of the native culture in the face of the onslaught of missionaries and colonists. The persistence of native medicine in the colonial period, through the Independence era, the Reform years, the Revolution of 1910, and up to the present time, despite the fact that modern medicine is obviously superior to the traditional, certainly is not due to the scant virtue of the preventive-curative function of native medicine, but rather to its social function which, because it is fundamental to the continuity and survival of the group, cannot be thrown overboard without grave peril.

The concepts and action patterns of Indian medicine, in surviving the contact with western culture and with the mass immigration of Africans that took place in the 17th century, were strengthened by ideas and practices based on very similar premises. The fusion of different systems of beliefs, attitudes and methods of operation, through a continuous process of acculturation, gave birth to a popular or folk culture that was the patrimony of groups disinherited in the colonial situation. The structure of exploitation established by the Europeans had placed the Indians, the Negroes, and those of mixed blood in positions of permanent subordination. In the colonial

situation, members of the European governing caste had available to them the benefits of rational Galenic medicine to resolve the problems emanating from illness and insecurity. The Indians, Negroes, mestizos and mulattoes, as castes subjected to domination, could turn only to magic medicine to satisfy the same needs. However, not even in that were they free agents. They suffered constant interference, the threat of penalty and physical force, on the part of those who carried out the imperial designs of the Spanish Crown.

The Court of the Holy Inquisition was established by the Catholic hierarchy to protect Christian orthodoxy from contamination by the magical-religious beliefs of the subordinate population. The Court was an agency of counter-acculturation that judged and condemned to corporal punishment and deprivation of liberty an undetermined, but considerable, number of curers, soothsayers, heretics, renegades, and other types of rebels who, clandestinely, kept alive the beliefs and practices of folk medicine.

Today, the rational philosophy of our era is a little more tolerant with respect to the measures taken to contradict popular beliefs. It has designed modern methods of control — which is not to say that its opposition is any less strong. And in spite of everything, those beliefs persist. What is the reason? The explanation is not simple; but it seems to be beyond question that the postulates of popular medicine continue in force because the social function of that medicine still has validity as an instrument capable of preserving the continuity of the traditional culture.

GONZALO AGUIRRE BELTRAN  
Eminent Mexican Anthropologist





## Some Plants Used in Pre-Hispanic Witchcraft

In his article "Description of Narcotics in the Florentine Codex," (*Revista de la Universidad de México*, January 1965), Alfredo López Austin says:

"Famous were the Nahuas for their knowledge of the properties of plants, applied not only to medicine, but to religious and secular ceremonies, and even to ignoble purposes of witchcraft and robbery, particularly with respect to narcotics. Thus, we find frequent references to the use of various ointments for fortifying or anesthetizing the body, presented as an act of courtesy to enemy lords upon declaring war against them; administered to captives before their sacrifice; utilized by priests to withstand the strain of the ritual, or to seek revelations; or the ingestion of hallucinogenic mushrooms in the ceremony offered by the merchant seeking to enhance his prestige."

Following is an abridged account of his Spanish translation of the description contained in the Florentine Codex, with his comments in italics.

COATL XOXOUHQUI (green serpent) or OLOLIUHQUI (that which makes dizzy). Its leaf is slender, small. It intoxicates; makes the head swim; bewitches one. He who eats it, drinks it, sees many terrifying things.

For people he detests, he places the herb in water, in food; with this he makes people dizzy. But it has a rancid odor, it burns the throat a little. As medicine for gout, it is only spread over the affected area.

*Various species with similar narcotic properties have been classified: Rivea corimbosa, Ipomea sidaefolia, Datura meteloides. "Gout" is the 16th century translation, obviously imprecise, of an unidentified malady.*

PEYOTE. It is white and found only in the stony expanse called Region of the Dead (the North). Upon him who eats it or drinks it, it produces an effect similar to that of the mushroom. He also sees many startling or amusing things. For one day, perhaps two, he feels the effects; then they pass. But it damages the heart; disturbs people; intoxicates them; makes them demented.

*This plant, frequently used today in northern Mexico, has been classified as Lophophora williamsi or Ariocarpus, although various cacti are known by the latter common name.*

TLAPATL. Small, round, purplish. Its skin is green; its leaves, very broad; its flowers, white; very smooth its fruit; black and malodorous its seed. It wounds; makes people inappetent, deranges the mind, intoxicates.

He who eats it will have no appetite; little by little he will die. And if he eats it, he will be insane forever; he will lose his mind; forever he will be bewitched; no longer will he be sane.

*The name tlapa is still used for one of the toloaches, and its Latin name is Datura stramonium L.*

MIXITL. It is of medium size, very round. Its branches are green; it has many seeds. It is used for gout. It is neither edible nor drinkable. It deadens one, silences one; it paralyzes the throat; it causes the voice to stick; makes one die of thirst; deadens the testicles; cracks the tongue.

One is not aware that he has drunk it, if he drinks it. Benumbed, if he closes his eyes, forever closed they will remain; if his eyes are open, he will see forever; it numbs, it silences. This is cured partially with wine.

*Datura stramonium. "Wine" is used in the original text.*

NANACATL (mushroom). It is found on the plains, in the zacate fields. Round head, long stem. It burns the mouth with its bitterness; it burns the throat; it intoxicates, makes one dizzy, bewilders one; it is medicine for chills and fever and for gout. Only two, three, are edible. It distresses, frightens, causes people to hide themselves.

He who eats much of it, many things will he see, terrifying, or perhaps amusing. He flees; hangs himself; flings himself over a cliff; cries out. It is eaten with honey.

*Wasson identifies it as Psilocybe, Stropharia, etc.*

TOCHTETEPON (rabbit's leg). A small herb, its leaves are very slender, very offensive to the smell; its root is white. It is deadly; it numbs people. He who drinks it, eats it, it burns him, it destroys his intestines. If some drink it in pulque, even though they take it out immediately, it paralyzes them. It injures the body; its parts cannot be moved. Of the witch doctor it is said: "He gives tochtetepon to people."

*Not identified.*



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